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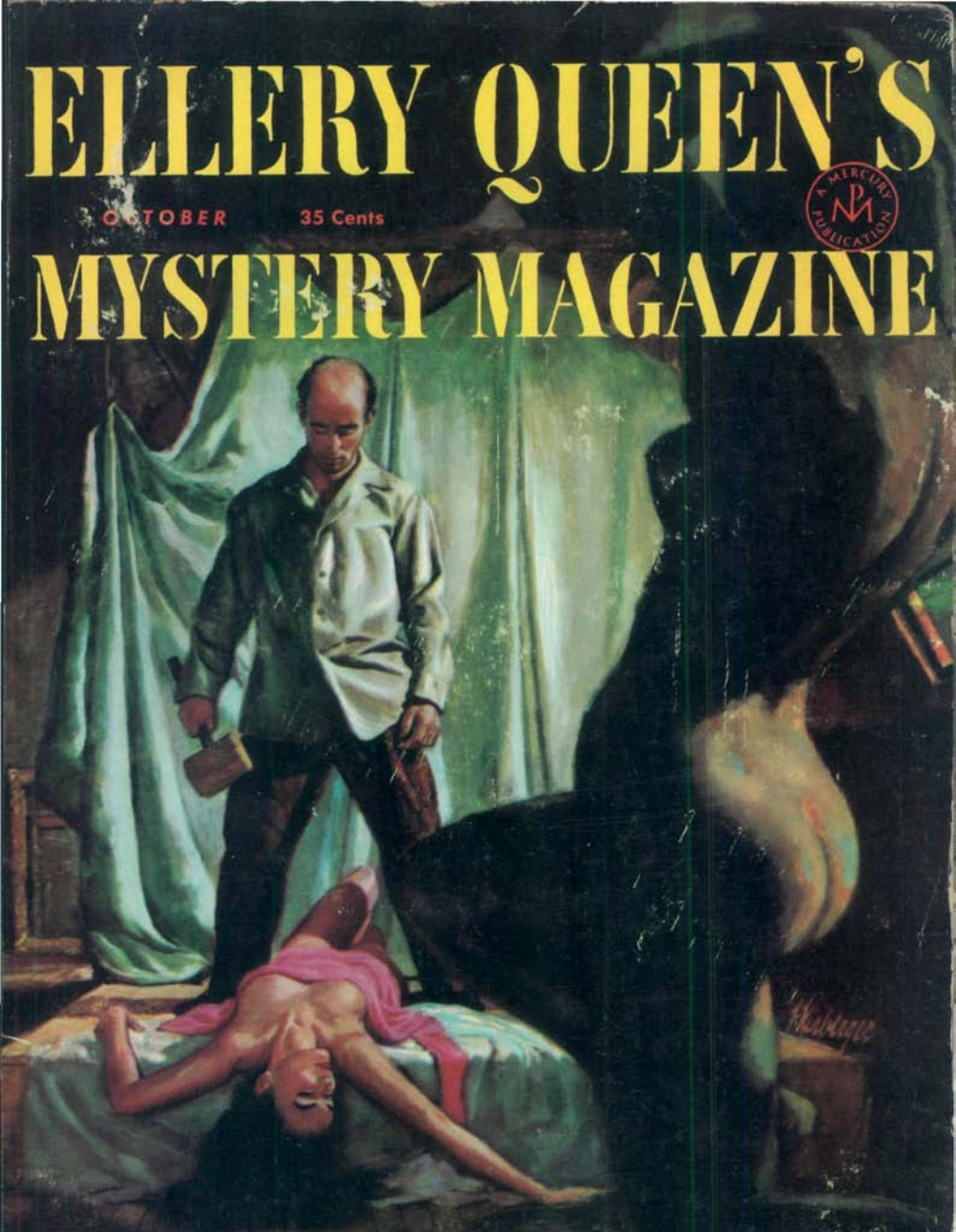

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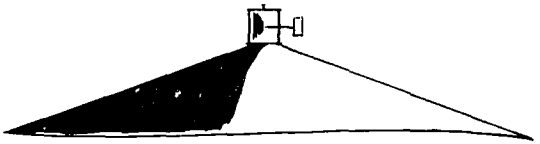

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

"Thomas Kyd" has just turned 50, has four children, and has taught theater history for the past 25 years. Under his real name he has written seven books in his own field, the last of which received the Macmillan award for "a book on a literary topic having the widest general interest." This prize-winning book was published late in 1952.

In his spare time Mr. Kyd writes detective novels. Now, don't get the wrong impression. This is not a case of the Harvard professor snobbishly "stooping to conquer." Quite the contrary. Mr. Kyd has the utmost respect for detective stories. His four full-length novels — BLOOD IS A BEGGAR, BLOOD OF VINTAGE, BLOOD ON THE BOSOM DEVINE, *and* COVER HIS FACE, *all published by Lippincott — were written not as an escape from professorial loftiness but, as the author himself expressed it,* con amore. *Further proof of Mr. Kyd's integrity in the detective field is his refusal to increase his production of detective novels, despite the well-known fact that teachers, even on the college level, can always use extra money. His output has never exceeded one detective book per year.*

Mr. Kyd also says, at the risk of sounding like a posturer, that he finds the detective novel the most morally satisfying of current forms of literature, and from the creative standpoint, the most challenging. As a craftsman, he likes the idea of writing with complete objectivity and within the frame of a convention, like the story-tellers of long ago, rather than writing obviously disguised autobiography or confessional meditations.

Now, meet Thomas Kyd's short-story sleuth, Dr. Andrew One, who is "a consultant in statistical method" and also a detective in the classical tradition.

HIGH COURT

by THOMAS KYD

IT WAS ALL BLUE LEATHER AND white mahogany in functional curves — modern, but solid and safe. That was the keynote. Solid safety.

"You won't wander off now, will you?"

Transoceanic's forage cap, blue with white braiding, sat on her head like

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a chicken comb. She lacked the hen-stuffiness but had the anxious glitter of eye.

"No," said the tall man with the pince-nez, "we will not wander off."

The short man grinned as she clucked along to the rest of her brood. "They do look out for you, don't they?"

"The service," said the tall man, "appears to be satisfactory."

The photocell door floated in a latecomer, and their muster was now complete — ten passengers from New York to London, two passengers from this world to the next . . .

"That," said the short man, "must be the fellow she's been looking for."

The other said nothing, but focused the latecomer in his pince-nez. The new arrival looked dumpy, unfunctional, his bosom heaving slightly, his puffed cheeks glistening with oil. Mobile with nervous tension, his features recorded emotions — at first relief, then sour-eyed distaste as his glance lighted on the somber young man by the window. He started for the nearest lounge, where four men were making friends with the quick affability of air travel, but when their faces came into full view he veered away. Surprise, bitterness, even a trace of fear washed over his mobile features.

"Could one of you gentlemen let me have a stamp?" Only a fagged smile was left as he tacked up to the tall man and the short one. The form envelope of his airline trip insurance fluttered in his hand. "I left 42nd Street in such a rush that —"

"May I?" The hen-mother was in among them, the letter already possessed. "You will be Mr. Lecky?"

"Lecky, yes, that's right. I just about made it, didn't I?"

Her clucking protected all three. "It's a little past departure time now, but it's quite all right. A slight delay until —"

"Hah!" burst from the tall man. "Now it begins!"

The forage cap bobbed away.

"Got to expect it in air travel, I guess," the short one said, nodding sagely. "Look, those four seem to be getting pretty thick. Maybe we ought to garner in the young chap. A little game in the crossing, if you gentlemen —"

"I do not play cards." A line formed between the eyes of the tall man, joggling his pince-nez. "I carry a chess-kit, but doubtless neither of you plays."

The latecomer shook his head. "Always think of it as a kind of Russian game myself."

The pince-nez snorted.

"I do play a little, as a matter of fact," said the short one. "At least I know the moves."

The pince-nez vibrated. "I do not play with persons who say 'at least I know the moves.' "

The deeper blue of Transoceanic's male uniform appeared in the door from the field. The announcement was friendly but crisp.

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"*Flight 300, New York to London, delayed until 4* P.M. *The light passenger load permits direct flight to Shannon, omitting the stop at Gander. We are taking on additional fuel and making a new flight plot. Thank you.*"

In the rectangle of field visible beyond the blue uniform, a tank truck was wheeling under a wing of the Lockheed Constellation. The three turned in unison toward an empty lounge.

"Long hop," said the short one.

"Only a handful of passengers for that 50-seat Clipper," said the latecomer, "and me so anxious I bought my reservation a full month ago — first of July for first of August."

"Same here," said the short one, "a day earlier, in fact — the thirtieth of June. It's the accident over Miami. For a few days everybody cancels."

The tall pince-nez cleared his throat. "We are, gentlemen, to be thrown together for another hour here, and until tomorrow morning, on the plane. It has been said that Americans are uneasy with an acquaintance until aware of his occupation and income. My income I shall not divulge. My occupation is consultant in statistical method."

The latecomer looked judicious. "Going to see a client?"

"My clients come to see me. I am visiting London to address the annual meeting of the Malthus Society. My name is Dr. Andrew One."

"Come again?" — from the short man.

"Pronounced and spelled like the numeral." The lean neck swiveled and the beaky face trained downward. "There is a type of mind that considers the name amusing."

"Not me, doctor," said the short man. "My name's no beauty, either. Cramp — Oscar Cramp."

"You heard mine. I'm B. J. Lecky, of Armstrong & Lecky, optical grinding equipment." The latecomer's eye flickered dolorously toward one of the four men opposite, then shifted to the one by the window. "I'm crossing to bid on retooling the shops of Witherspoon Lenses, Limited." The quiver of his chops seemed to shout that the contract was needed.

"I'm with La Scala Galleries," said Cramp. "Crossing to look at the miniatures at the Victoria and Albert."

Dr. One perked up. "I shall do so myself. I was delighted to read in yesterday's *Times* that the museum governors had just voted to extend the exhibition into August." He scrutinized Cramp. "I should not have suspected that you were a connoisseur."

"Appraiser," corrected Cramp. "This show brings Hilliard and Oliver together in quantity for the first time, so you can really compare their styles. We've been offered two Hilliards for 20,000. If they're really Hilliards they're worth 50."

"And if they're worth 50, you'll pay twenty."

"Look, doctor. They've been *offered* to us as Hilliards. Is it a crime to make a dollar?"

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"It is not," said Dr. One, "a crime to make a dollar." He looked about bleakly, his hand describing an accusing arc. "The usual dull lot. Those four will each be crossing to make a dollar. The sullen youngster by the window will be some sort of engineer. The young couple are flagrantly honeymooners. That wisp of Hindu girl in the bilious green sari is certainly a student and, almost as certainly, a student at Columbia University. The other single female, whom I should call elderly despite her own convictions, will be restlessly scattering about the world the dollars amassed by her late husband." He yawned, then jerked upright. "Pardon me."

He strode to the door to the field. He was promptly turned back.

"What you might call a character," whispered B. J. Lecky.

"He is that," said Cramp, also in a low voice. "But I guess he knows his statistics."

Then Dr. One was with them again, angrily disposing his angles on the lounge.

"We are not only to wait, gentlemen, but under concentration-camp restrictions."

At 4, an announcement that the weather report from Shannon might be more favorable at 5. At 5, an announcement that their departure would be at 6. At 7 they were in the air.

The dozen were as weary at the sight of each other as of blue leather and white mahogany. All but the young couple had scattered into separate seats. When the safety-belts were unfastened, the steward began to push dinner trays through the galley window and the hostess to pass them around. This one was young, the face under the forage cap pretty, the body under the blue uniform functional but not depressingly safe. As she put the pillows on their laps and the trays on the pillows, her smile and voice were warm.

That evening there was no fraternizing. The plane hummed over a floor of gray cloud, the wind washing monotonously past the windows. At dusk several passengers settled at once under the white-bordered blue blankets tenderly arranged by the hostess. The aisle lights went off at 10. Only here and there a white pencil of reading-ray descended on book or magazine. Mr. Cramp's wiped out at 11:30 and, precisely at 12, Dr. One's.

The hostess walked softly along the aisle; release now for a few hours, her charges all tucked in. She slipped into the tiny galley, the shaft of light narrowing to nothing as she gently closed the door. Although thousands of feet aloft and surfaced in cold aluminum, a kitchen is still a kitchen. The bulb shone cozily on the hot-table where she and the steward leaned, their voices murmuring shop.

Dark grayness enveloped the cabin, the empty seats, the eleven shapeless bundles. There should have been

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twelve bundles, but the wrappings of one had melted with the closing of the galley door.

A shadow moved along the aisle. It came to rest beside one of the bundles, then moved into the vacant place behind. The hum of the engines, the wash of the wind seemed louder in the motionless grayness. But not quite loud enough to muffle completely the single alien sound — like a ripe melon splitting moistly under the edge of a rather dull axe . . .

The tops of the clouds boiled rosily in the slanting beams of the red ball in the east. Dr. One's reliable watch read 2:45. He clipped on his pince-nez and gazed sternly at the sun, then stared again at his watch. Mr. Cramp leaned forward from the seat behind.

"I see you've been caught the same as me."

Dr. One's face swung around. "What do you mean?"

Cramp slipped into the seat at his side. "Stayed up too late, forgetting —" he yawned, then nodded at the fireworks.

"I retired at 12 as always. What has it to do with that!" Dr. One pointed accusingly.

"We've flown into it — outdistanced our watches. It's sunrise where we are now."

"Not at all! In the east the time of day is later. The sun should not rise until — ugh!" His head gave a bitter jerk.

Cramp laughed. "What's the matter, doctor? Don't you ever make mistakes?"

"Not often enough to be fond of the sensation."

They rose to stretch, turning round to the double line of seats. The blaze through the windows was as insistent as a gong, and most of the bundles were disintegrating. Only the bulky bundle of Mr. Lecky four seats behind them remained intact and, across the aisle from him, the lean bundle of the Hindu girl.

There was rattling in the galley.

"It won't go bad," said Mr. Cramp, and Dr. One nodded in modified agreement. The fragrance in the air was coffee.

Since theirs were the first occupied seats, theirs was the first beam from the hostess. Her face was a luminous pink from the dawn as she bent with the tray. Her eyes, level with theirs, were a luminous amber. The effect was hypnotic, and the gaze of both men was on this interior sunrise as their hands groped for the plastic cups. She averted her own eyes to the space between their shoulders. Thus it was that she saw not the tousled top of Mr. Lecky's head, as they had done, but his forehead protruding just above the edge of the blanket.

Transoceanic is rigorous in its selection and training of hostesses. Had the clipper burst into flames, this one would have preserved an asbestos spirit and coolly walked to her post; but there are emergencies no course can cover. Her luminous

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eyes widened until the whites showed, and her hands gave a convulsive jerk. The cups of coffee rained into the lap of Mr. Cramp. His cry of pain lost by a hair to her shriek of horror.

Everyone was suddenly galvanized. The hostess had shrieked only once, but some other woman took it up. The aisle jammed with milling figures, formed a clot by Mr. Lecky's seat. The door from the galley banged open and the steward tried to fight his way through. His feet tangled with the blankets on the floor, catapulting him into Mr. Cramp. Dr. One's neck craned over the melée as he barked sharp commands to which no one listened. The Hindu girl was plucking with bony hands at the wall of bodies hemming her in.

"Let me through, plaise! I am a doocter. Let me through, plaise!"

The wall parted by force of habit before the magic words, in spite of the shrill quaver. The green sari pressed against the seat arm as the olive face hovered over Mr. Lecky. Solemnly she announced what she had been last to discover.

"This shentleman is daid."

The rose had long since drained from the cloud-tops when Dr. One took his place at the head of the aisle. The light on the faces in his audience was a prosaic white. The seats directly beside him were vacant except for Mr. Cramp, who sat self-consciously with pencil and pad. The next four seats, a pair on either side of the aisle, were occupied by four men, their expressions stolid but watchful. The seats behind theirs were also filled, the pair on the left by the young couple, and on the right by the Hindu girl and a woman whose coiffure was like a golden chrysanthemum perched on an antique vase. The gloomy young man sat solitary behind, his face frozen into a look of unconcern, his arm thrown over the seatback.

"What I am proposing, ladies and gentlemen," said Dr. One, "is that we function as a committee of the whole, as a fact-finding panel; or, if you will, as an unofficial court of justice. Mr. Cramp has consented to take minutes and I to preside."

Dr. One cleared his throat with formality.

"What has happened is clear. The effect on the rest of us I shall also make clear. You have seen the crushed temple of the late Mr. Lecky. That it could have resulted from accident is, of course, untenable. Our flight has been smooth, and mere nodding in sleep could never have produced that lethal impact. You have seen the small bottle on the metal ledge at his side, with its barbiturate label. No doubt Mr. Lecky took several tablets to insure sleep during our passage. In the lethargy thus induced, his hair was grasped and his temple driven with great force against the ledge. Mr. Lecky was murdered."

The woman with the golden coiffure vented a thin moan. Two of the male heads nodded.

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"That the plane crew shares this view is evident from the measures taken. The body has not been moved and we are forbidden to approach it, despite the persistent use of the word 'accident.' The steward and hostess are standing watch. At the moment our Captain is with them."

Dr. One made a slight bow to the urbane figure halfway down the aisle. He had the lean body and chiseled features of the professional airman. The features were registering polite attention.

"I have no quarrel with the Captain. He reduced the disgusting disorder in this cabin when I myself had failed. No doubt he has his own reasons for remaining uncommunicative about his plans." Dr. One smiled frostily. "But what those plans are I can tell you. We shall all be held at Shannon as material witnesses and flown back to New York at once."

He lifted a quelling hand at the restless stir in his audience.

"I am scheduled to deliver an important address in London tomorrow evening. An option held by Mr. Cramp's organization will expire in a few days. Although I cannot consider his dilemma in the same class as my own, it remains true that he stands to lose a considerable sum of money. Doubtless the rest of you have appointments which you consider important."

"Consider!" A man with the mahogany hue of a migrant between Maine and Miami leaned testily forward. "Why, dammit, if I don't get up to St. David's by tomorrow morning —"

"Precisely. Hence this meeting. Our one chance of going our respective ways is to deliver up the guilty party at Shannon — to make him stand self-confessed. My directions are as follows. Each of you will rise in turn and give three pieces of information about himself."

Agitated motions from Mr. Cramp made the speaker lean sidewise. He listened irritably for a moment.

"Mr. Cramp has suggested that I amend the last remark to read that each of *us* give three pieces of information about *ourselves*. While the notion is preposterous that I could have anything to do with the demise of Mr. Lecky, I am willing to comply —"

"Not a word! Not one single word!" The wintry face under the summery hair was as defiant as Barbara Frietchie's. The bedecked body stood quiveringly erect, as if high voltage were passing through it. "Unless Mr. Abernathy is present, I'll say nothing, sign nothing! You cannot make me. Mr. Abernathy must be here or —"

Dr. One's pince-nez began showering sparks.

"Who, pray, is Mr. Abernathy?"

"My attorney, of course. Mr. Abernathy manages my affairs. Until Mr. Abernathy is called, I shall —"

"*Be seated!*"

The force behind his injunction made the doctor pause to take breath. As he resumed, his tone was austere.

"Before giving the information

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required, I want you all to know that I have exonerated the crew. As a statistician, I can say that the chances against one's victim taking passage on one's own plane are simply stupendous. No" — the words were decisive — "the murderer is one of you passengers."

He glared as Mr. Cramp kicked at his ankle, but he altered his last remark.

"The murderer, I repeat, is one of us passengers. Now it stands to reason that three facts distinguish the situation of this murderer." He popped up fingers to mark them. "First, he will have had a prior acquaintance with the victim. Second, since he was the pursuer, he will have reserved his place on this plane *after* Mr. Lecky reserved his. Third, he will be able to give no reason for making this trip to England, or at best, only a trivial one. Speaking again as a statistician, I can say that the chances are even more stupendous against all three facts applying to more than one person present. That one person will be the murderer. Do I make myself clear?"

His pause was not quite long enough to permit a reply.

"Excellent. The innocent will have no reason for silence, and the guilty no pretext. So far as lying is concerned, Mr. Cramp will be noting down the replies and those replies will be checked. It happens that Mr. Lecky remarked to me that he bought his reservation on July 1 — one full month in advance. The date when each of you bought yours will be stamped on the binding of your ticket."

There was a general reaching into pockets and handbags.

"And so far as knowing Mr. Lecky is concerned" — he held up a lone bony finger until all eyes focused upon it — "I happen also to know that the victim *did* have a prior acquaintance with someone now present."

In the thick moment of silence that followed, the head of the young man in the rear twisted sickly to one side. There was also a reaction from the seat next to the rumpled tweeds. Its occupant had the beefy neck and shark jaw of the tough competitor. As Dr. One's eyes rested briefly on him, the neck flushed and the jaw grew rocky.

"And as to the reasons for the trip," concluded the doctor with a new airiness, "we shall judge them by our collective common sense. You are ready? Good. Speaking for myself, I am Dr. Andrew One. I did not know Mr. Lecky. I purchased my ticket only two weeks ago, but the fact is not incriminating. My invitation to address the Malthus Society came months ago, as its scores of members can testify." He turned. "You have that down, Mr. Cramp?" he asked.

Mr. Cramp prolonged his work with the pencil for a moment, then rose sheepishly.

Dr. One nodded at him.

"I'm Oscar Cramp. I didn't know

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Mr. Lecky either. I bought my ticket at 42nd Street on June 30. I'm going to London to assess the value of some art objects offered to the La Scala galleries. I — er — uh — I thank you."

He sank abruptly and bent over his pad.

"And now you, sir."

Dr. One's words were addressed to the least resistant-looking member of his troupe, the male-half of the young couple. As he rose to his feet, the female-half looked up trustingly at his face, although guilt was stamped on every feature.

"I'll — I'll speak for the two of us." He thrust back shoulders draped in a patently new sports jacket. "We are Mr. and Mrs. Bob B. Whipple. We didn't know that unfortunate gentleman at all, neither of us. We're going to Europe on a honey — on our wedding trip, as you might say." He swallowed. "You see, Janet's people are English, and her father —"

"Come, come."

"Gosh, doctor, you're not going to believe this." The young features twisted in pain. "Our tickets are stamped July 3, but I *know* they were ordered earlier. Janet's old man is putting up for the whole trip —"

Dr. One interrupted. "You say you are just married?"

"Sure! Look." A copy of the East Orange *Examiner* was in his hand, open to the Society page, where two waxwork figures beamed out at the camera. "Just day before yesterday. We spent last night at the Sherry-Netherland —"

"You may be seated." Dr. One addressed his audience. "These two persons occupied adjacent seats. They are recently married and not apt, I should say, to be passing their time in taking life."

Their oldest member, who was sitting next to the mahogany man, took this for a salty quip and met it with a ribald cackle. He chopped it short on a look from Dr. One.

"We are agreed that Mr. and Mrs. Whipple may be eliminated? Good." The pince-nez angled to the other side of the aisle.

"Not a word! No!" The bedecked figure was erect again, the high voltage still pouring through it.

"Sit down, madam!"

She did.

"Of you I ask nothing but silence. You lack the competence for murder."

The golden burst of curls seemed still writhing in protest while the Hindu girl arose with slow majesty.

"I am Mees Varmahana Singh. I deed not know the deceazed shentleman. Last year I graduated weet honors from the Coloombia School of Medicine. Thees year I eenterned at the Medical Center, and I —"

"Just the three facts if you —"

"I eentend to spashialize in —"

"Miss Singh, please! Not an autobiography. The ticket now. The facts about the ticket *and* your journey."

"My teeket was purchased by my oonkle in London, who cabled me last veek that my moother and father

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weel be flying from Eendia to Lon —"

"Excellent. That will be —"

"Since I had not seen my moother and father since —"

"Thank you, thank you. That will do."

She subsided into the billows of green sari. Dr. One undertook a brief résumé.

"We can, I believe, dismiss from consideration all four persons in the second row. Three are women, and although the crime could have been committed by a woman of the brawny type, that type is not represented. Furthermore —"

A man in rumpled tweeds rubbed hard at his chin. "Look here! This thing is narrowing down damn fast. Pretty soon —"

"The innocent, sir, need feel no alarm. We have important persons still to be heard from" — his cough was portentous — "important persons indeed."

The young man in the rear was on his feet, his hands hefting the air.

"Why don't you come out with it! I know who you're aiming at!" The white face worked convulsively. "It's a frame-up — the whole blasted business! But don't you try to pin it on me or I'll — I'll —"

"Temper! Temper! Calmly now. No one is aiming particularly at you."

"Well, what else? What chance have I got?" He sucked in air to control the sob in his voice. "I knew him, sure — we were crossing together."

Eight heads wheeled in unison. He bent back from the collective stare.

"But I didn't do it! Why should I? We were on bad terms — everybody at Armstrong & Lecky knows that. But why should I kill him? All I wanted was to get out, and get another —"

"You were crossing *together?*"

"Yes. He got both reservations. I'm the cost engineer at the plant, and he needed me to help on the bid for retooling Witherspoon Lenses. The company needs me more than I need it, I can tell you! I was quitting as soon as I could sell my house in Hastings, but meanwhile —"

"You were crossing as his employee" — Dr. One's voice was crisp — "yet you were not on speaking terms. What was the reason for this strange situation?"

"His wife. Blanche. Blanche Lecky." The young man's mouth formed an inverted scimitar and his neck elongated, as if he were swallowing a bad oyster. "She's younger than him, but she's a helluva lot older than me. She threw herself at me, but I wasn't having any. Everybody at the company got onto it, including him, but she managed to twist it all backwards. She was the one that had to give *me* the brush-off, she claimed, and he believed it. But why should I want to kill him? I know it looks bad, but —"

He stared back with horror.

"You people! Cut it out!" His voice soared. "I'm not the only one who knew Lecky!" His index finger shot forward. "What about him? That's Simon Ziegler!"

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"You dirty pup!"

The man with the bull neck and shark jaw was on his feet. The neck was almost molten.

"Well, you were more of an enemy than me!"

"You pointing at *me!*"

"You *staring* at me!"

Ziegler swung around to face Dr. One. "All right, nosey parker. I knew him. I made this trip because he did. I make optical equipment and I'm going to bid on Witherspoon jobs too." The neck came to a boil again. "But I've been beating Armstrong & Lecky for five years now! If you think I have to commit murder to take business away from that rabbit and his hole-in-the-wall plant, you can take another think!"

"Hey," whispered Cramp, tugging the doctor's coat. "They're going too fast. I can't get it down."

Ziegler's jaw clamped, and he thumped into his seat. The plane, hitting a shallow pocket, seemed to bump at the impact. The young engineer had also seated himself, his head bent forward into his palms.

For the first time Dr. One seemed abstracted. He stood with his pince-nez focused down and sidewards, fixed on the flying pencil of Mr. Cramp. He came out of it gradually.

"And you, sir?"

The rumpled tweeds arose, then the mahogany man, then the oldster. All disclaimed prior acquaintance with Mr. Lecky. They seemed relaxed, almost smug, comforted by the late revelations. All were crossing to buy — the mahogany man golf clubs, or golfers. He had bought his space a week before Lecky. The two others had picked up recent cancellations.

Dr. One seemed scarcely to listen. At the end, he beckoned the hostess. His directions were too low in tone even to reach Mr. Cramp. She stepped into the operational section of the plane, then reappeared almost at once, to hand Dr. One the blue envelope of a radiogram. He withdrew the enclosed sheet, glanced at it, then folded it neatly. He bowed.

"All that remains, ladies and gentlemen, is for the person I shall name to deliver himself up to the Captain."

He continued after allowing a few moments for the stir to subside. The folded blue sheet was held where all eyes could concentrate upon it.

"The criminal will see his position so clearly that he will make no denial. However, my words to the contrary notwithstanding, the rest of us will be held at Shannon. The more intelligent of you may have been able to deduce that the hope I held forth was merely to encourage cooperation. Of course, the officials will not be so logical as to let us proceed on our way." He frowned. "It is most irritating. This murder has proved so inconvenient to me personally that I have been spurred to retaliation."

"Who was it!" snarled Ziegler.

"From the outset," continued the doctor, "I have naturally employed trickery. Before I asked you to give the three pieces of information, I was

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reasonably sure who the murderer was. I was merely seeking confirmation and awaiting proof. What I said about the importance of the three pieces of information was, of course, the reverse of the truth. The murderer will have provided himself *excellent* reasons for flying to London, he will probably have had *no* prior acquaintance with his victim, and he will have tried to buy his reservation *in advance* of his victim."

The body of the young engineer came erect, and the neck of Simon Ziegler dulled from lobster to its normal brick.

"No murderer is going to risk enclosing himself with a corpse and a limited number of suspects unless he is reasonably sure that he is in the clear; hence, he will strive to meet the conditions indicated. But, you may ask, why should a man murder a person whom he does not even know, and how could he be so familiar with that person's plans that he would be able to book space on a particular plane in advance of that person himself?" Dr. One smiled tolerantly. "The answer is simple. Blanche. Blanche Lecky."

The man in rumpled tweeds half-rose, and twisted until he could scrutinize the Hindu girl and the woman with the chrysanthemum hair.

"No, no," said Dr. One. "I do not mean that the woman herself did the deed. Blanche Lecky is the absent accomplice. I may as well explain that this crime is of the classic type — compounded by lover and faithless wife. Stupid as always, of course, but carried out in this instance with a certain low cunning. My original theory as to the nature of the crime was confirmed by the remarks of our young engineer. Mrs. Lecky was shown to be the proper — or should I say — improper type. Their plan had advantages. They could not count on the presence of the business rival — that was pure luck — but they could count on the presence of the young associate. If the death were classed as murder, not accident as they hoped, he would provide the red herring. But of course the choice of a plane murder to begin with was dictated by money. Airline trip insurance covers only casualties in transit, but the rates are low. For instance, my own policy, like most of yours, cost $5.00 in premium for $25,000 in death benefits. Mr. Lecky was of the nervous type. Also, he could be counted on to prove his love for his restive wife by mailing her a policy for the maximum amount. The personalities of all our principal figures emerge. The murderer himself will be the type of philanderer whose business carries him into various well-to-do homes, usually to transact business with the mistress. I must grant that he is capable of quick decisions and quick action."

"Look," said the mahogany man. "Are you going to read that radiogram, or aren't you?"

"I am," said Dr. One. "But I must first explain its nature. I have had to resort to a little literary invention as

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well as to trickery. Our plane was four hours late in starting. You will notice that we are losing altitude as we now slant in toward the Irish coast and the mouth of the Shannon."

Eyes turned involuntarily towards the windows.

"On normal schedule, we should have been in London just two hours ago. Just two hours ago, therefore, I caused a radio message to be sent to London from this plane. The message directed that a cable be sent from London to the home of the late Mr. Lecky. His address and the name of his next of kin are recorded on the data card filed aboard."

Dr. One took from his pocket a slip of white paper.

"I shall read the draft of the message I took the liberty to invent."

He adjusted his pince-nez and unfolded the white sheet.

"*Dear Blanche. No opportunity coming over. Shall I try going back?*"

He looked up.

"The name I signed to this message was suggested by a chance remark made by one of you passengers before we took off. This person said that he was traveling in order to visit the exhibit of miniatures at the Victoria and Albert Museum. But since he said he had bought his reservation on the thirtieth of June, whereas the exhibit had only been extended into August a few days before he spoke, he was obviously lying." Dr. One unfolded the blue slip he had taken from the radiogram envelope. "The reply to the cable from London to Mrs. Lecky has been relayed from London to this plane. It places on record absolute proof of the identity of the murderer."

All crouched forward as he readjusted his pince-nez.

"*Dear Oscar. Not after cabling me, you fool. Do nothing.*"

He was, the doctor had said correctly, capable of quick decisions and quick actions. Those who thought that the hunched shoulders of Mr. Cramp were shaking with sobs were quite mistaken. The ripping sound of the plastic face of the lever box was covered by the hum of the motors, but not the loud snap of the hatch-bolts. In a twinkling the Captain and Steward were up the aisle. Yet they were too late. Some air and a flight of loose papers were sucked out of the pressurized cabin in the first seconds; then came the vortex of inrushing gale. Although there was no one between the seat and the galley bulkhead to obstruct them, it took the Captain and Steward some time to force shut the emergency vent and to reshoot the bolts. Meanwhile Dr. One complained about the draft.

High above the hole in the Atlantic that marked the exit of Mr. Cramp, two slips of paper sported with each other. They were white and blue, like Transoceanic's colors. They fluttered, danced, dived, gamboled in the almost-Irish air. Both had escaped from the hand of the inventive Dr. One — and both were completely blank.

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

Two young men and two young women meet in a restaurant — a common, ordinary restaurant. For one of the men — George McCarren of Cleveland — it is a blind date. But out of this commonplace meeting, out of the drab, everyday atmosphere of a crowded restaurant, there slowly emerges a sense of terror. And the terror mounts for the young man on a blind date — all because Peggy, the dizzy blonde who worked as an usher in one of the movie houses, had "her little ways." Sure, her boy friend Al kept saying there was only one thing to do — you got to laugh it off. But George McCarren of Cleveland just couldn't laugh it off . . .

A tale of unforgettable horror by Charlotte Armstrong whose story, "The Enemy," won First Prize in EQMM's Sixth Annual Contest. Miss Armstrong's new prize-winning story, "Laugh It Off," is more in the vein of her memorable novel, MISCHIEF *. . .*

LAUGH IT OFF

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

THE BIG, DARK-HAIRED GIRL SAID, "Here's Peggy, now." So he, George McCarren, from Cleveland, turned his head.

The restaurant was too full of small tables. She came dodging and winding towards them, with her blonde head ducked apologetically and her small body drawn thin at the hips to twist through the narrow places. He and Al were not yet all the way to their feet when she tumbled into the fourth chair at their table.

Al said, "Hi! Peggy, this is my friend, George McCarren. George, this is the dizzy little blonde I was telling you about . . . What d'you think, hm?"

"Don't know as I blame you," George said, and grinned politely.

The little blonde girl, without raising her head, rolled it to glance at Al, briefly, and then at George. He was waiting for her to see him but when she looked his way there was a wrong focus to her eyes. He began, right there, to wonder what she had on her mind. And later he remembered the whole scurrying and scrambling of her arrival.

Now she pulled her lips apart. "Hello, Rita. How do you do, George. May I have a drink?"

As Al twisted to make signs at a waiter, George McCarren said in impulse, "Take mine."

Peggy took it. In both hands, greedily. When she put down the

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empty glass, she finally looked at George with seeing eyes.

"Hey," said Al, "you must be mighty thirsty. What's the matter?"

"I'm a little bit upset," she said in a low voice. "Something I saw in the street." Her hand lifted, fingers spread, and the fingers quivered. "Unpleasant. Skip it."

"Yes, let's, shall we?" said the big dark girl in a drawling way and went right on talking. "What are we going to do for this stranger in our midst, now that we're all here?" George thought this Rita was quite attractive until she smiled. But her smile did bad things, made too many lines, parentheses within parentheses, around her crowded teeth.

"Well, I dunno," Al said. "What do you say, boys and girls? Dance? Bite to eat first?"

It was too late for a show or anything like that. Both these girls, George knew from Al, worked evenings — Rita in a little shop that stayed open at night, and Peggy as an usher in a movie theatre. There was something exotic in this experience of meeting girls at such an hour.

When he confessed that he did not dance, the date resolved itself to supper. Al began to act the host with the menu and the tall dark girl arched her neck and made very good chatter about food. George decided that she was probably a very nice girl. But there was that little mystery hanging about the blonde and he couldn't help sneaking looks at her.

And he couldn't help wondering what she was thinking about. She wasn't pretty. Her chin was short and brought her small brooding face too abruptly in at the bottom. Her mouth was small and tight-lipped. All around it the smooth, fine skin played in the tiniest of dimpling ripples. Sometimes the dimpling was echoed by a recurring and vanishing indentation just above the cheekbone. The whole smooth small face seemed to bubble with hints and secrets, and he could neither meet nor read her eyes.

She was Al's girl, though, this Peggy. And Rita was trying hard to be pleasant. He was tall, so the tall one was for him, of course.

They had just begun to eat when a man in gray came in and sat down at a table against the wall. Peggy happened to turn around and when she saw the man her head snapped. She froze. She stared at the table and the dishes and the cloth and her own clenched hands. She might just as well have shouted.

George turned toward her in quick inquiry. He heard Al heave a kind of sigh, which surprised a corner of his attention. But he was watching Peggy's face and the funny look in her eyes and her nostrils beginning to dilate with quickening breath.

"Listen," she said. "Don't move. Don't look too suddenly. Do you see the man back of me to my left near the wall?"

"Yeah?" said Al.

Peggy said, "I think he wants to kill me."

George looked. The man, in profile

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to them, was apparently studying the menu card. He was very thin and sallow, with dark marks on the pouching skin near his eyes. The face was sharp-boned, the body narrow, tense, and unhealthy. He seemed indifferent to everyone in the crowded restaurant, including them.

But Peggy's head began to pivot, as if it were compelled, and now the man in gray looked up, as if he had been tagged by her gaze. He looked directly at her, rather stonily, for a moment. Then he made the shortest, briefest of nods and plunged his attention back into the menu.

"Why?" said George in a low voice.

"Yeah, why does he want to bother to do that?" Al said, too lightly.

Peggy began to blink rapidly. Her face contorted. "Oh, Al, please . . ."

Rita said, "I'd like my coffee now." Her voice was choked and angry.

George put his hand on the blonde's little hand; the tiny bones and the tension and the fluttering of it made him think of a bird. He said, "Better tell us about it, hadn't you, Peggy?" He could feel his body thickening protectively — *bravening*, he thought to himself, if there is such a word.

Peggy's hand fluttered and got away. She said, "Eat. Please eat, as if there wasn't anything . . . *Please* . . ."

Al said, rather coldly, "I'm eating."

"Tell us," urged George.

Her voice had a hush to it, deadened and muted. The tone warned them not to betray that she was saying anything important. She still didn't look at any of them, but George felt she would have looked at him, had she dared. "I came out of the theatre, alone, just now. By the side door, into the alley. I saw something I shouldn't have seen." She put her fork into the food blindly, lifted it and let it fall.

"What did you see?" George broke a roll. He heard the same hush in his own voice. He felt courage and excitement pulsing inside of him.

"I saw shadows . . . and men fighting. A man fell. There wasn't any noise. The other man struck *down!*" Peggy turned her eyes to show the whites. "And then he came fast out of the deep part of the alley and I saw his face."

"*That* face?"

"Yes. And he . . . he saw mine."

George understood at once. Could be dangerous! The sense of peril jumping out of the rather ordinary restaurant atmosphere was delicious. But he heard Al say easily, "So now he's got to knock you off. Because you're the witness. Sure. Y'know, this isn't one of your better efforts, baby."

"Wait a minute," George said, startled and even a little hostile.

"Peggy goes in for this sort of thing," said Rita softly. She passed her napkin over the contempt on her mouth. "You mustn't mind her. It's just her little way."

Peggy said quickly, brokenly, "But it's true! Please, I swear . . . He did . . . I saw . . ." Her eyes flew around the circle of their faces. George, looking down, could see that her knuckles were dead white.

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"We'll protect you," Al rumbled. "Just relax, baby. Coffee now, for everybody?"

"I shouldn't have looked at him," Peggy said in a whimper. "Oh, I shouldn't have looked around. Now he knows that I've recognized him."

George said, "You think he followed you here?" It seemed to him that he and Peggy almost embraced, with the long, deep, direct look between them.

"Of course," she answered.

"Naturally. Naturally," said Al. "Everybody follows Peggy. All kinds of sinister characters."

George, gazing into her beseeching eyes, truly believed she was frightened and that something must be done. He said, "Listen, Al . . ."

"You listen, George," Al said promptly. "I hate to have to say this, but she's just a little liar. Does this all the time. Different stories." He waved his hand. "Little habit she has. Hey, Peggy, remember the time you got me worked up that you'd just swallowed poison by mistake? Brother," said Al, "she held out that time up to but not including the stomach pump. I dunno what it is," he grumbled amiably. "You just got to laugh it off."

Rita said, trying to be gentle, "You see, George, we've been through all this before. If you had, you wouldn't worry." She laughed, trying hard. "She sees an awful lot of movies, you know."

Now he felt confused. He looked all around the table and ended looking at the blonde. "*Are* you lying about this?" he asked quietly.

Her face broke into an expression of terror and distress and then recovered its smoothness, although the distress and the terror bubbled and skittered just under the skin's surface. "I *saw* him! He *knows* me!" She bent her head. "I guess it's hard to believe . . ."

"You don't exactly have to guess," Al said with some anger. "Peggy, I told you, didn't I? You were never going to pull another one of these things. Not with me."

"All right," she said swiftly. "All right. All right. I can be wrong. He's not the one. Or he doesn't know me."

George saw the heavy effort of her throat to swallow. Then he remembered: *The man had nodded.*

Rita tried to recover the gaiety that had gone before, but George couldn't respond. He didn't know what to think. He couldn't keep his eyes off Peggy's face, off the winking and the wincing in the dimpling play of tiny muscles under her skin.

Finally, Al leaned over and said to him directly, "Listen, George, I can see you got to get your mind off Peggy's little contribution to dramatic art. I don't blame you for wondering, but let me tell you one or two more things. So you'll realize." Al was not angry now, but stern and straightforward. "She got lost from work one time, never showed up for two days. When she finally did, she tells the boss she had a stroke of amnesia and was in Bellevue. Not true. I know because

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that was the time we went up to my sister's in Boston. So O.K. You might say she was just trying to pull a fast one on the boss. Fair enough. But I say it didn't have to be *that* fast. But that's her idea of something to tell."

Peggy said nothing. Her lips had fallen apart in a little sigh of despair. Her hands were wound together and the back of her neck was tensely aware of the pale man at the table behind her.

"So another time," Al went on, "she gets herself kidnaped — or so she said. Well, she managed to get kidnaped *and* escape in about six hours, which I thought was pretty quick. So I checked and she spent four of those hours in a beauty parlor. They're not true, George. She tells them wild and they're not true. And, as I say, I dunno what it is . . ."

Rita said with poisonous sweetness, "It's a little childish, don't you think? Of course, it can be amusing, when you understand."

George thought if he were the blonde girl he'd snap at that one. Peggy didn't snap. She just sat there, tense and sad. She said faintly, "I'm sorry. I know. I've done a lot of . . . kidding. But not this time."

The fable came inevitably to George's mind. He said aloud, soberly, "You've been crying 'wolf'."

She said, forlornly, "I guess I have."

"Looks like this wolf is going on about his business," Al announced. "All he wanted was a glass of milk. He's had it and he's leaving us. Looks like he's lost interest — *if* he ever had any."

The four of them were silent as the man in gray rose from his table by the wall and walked off without even a glance in their direction.

When he had disappeared, Peggy drew in a shaky breath. She even smiled. "O.K.?" Al patted her arm. "Fun while it lasted but that's enough for tonight, now." He was indulgent. He was kind. "What about dessert? Anybody want something sweet?" He leaned over and kissed the blonde girl's temple swiftly. "And silly?"

She said, "I'm sorry." She had winced a little at Al's caress.

George McCarren wasn't so sure. Not so sure at all. He kept hearing things under all the surface tones — the jealous anger under Rita's smooth chatter, the effort under Al's show of tolerance and forgiveness, and clearest of all, the fright under Peggy's polite and inconsequential responses.

He could not miss the lip's trembling against the cup, the wobble of the cigarette tip against the steadiness of a match flame, the smile that vanished from her mouth so quickly when all eyes but his were turned the other way. He tried to pretend otherwise, but he never stopped noticing every tiny thing about her, and she knew it, and this was like a line, a connection, a quivering wire of communication between them. George was troubled.

When at last Al won the amiable contest for the check and paid it, and they rose from the table, the girls and

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the men separated politely before leaving the restaurant.

George and Al waited by the bar. "Quick one?" Al suggested, and they ordered.

"So you don't think there's anything to it? What Peggy said?" George inquired, out of his trouble.

"Naw. Like I told you, forget it."

"Why does she do it, Al?"

"I dunno. Because it sure doesn't go down with me any more. She ought to know that. Probably," said Al, darkly, "she put on the act for *you*. You're good-looking, dress well, seem prosperous."

"I don't get it," George said slowly and carefully, because he was embarrassed.

"Yeah, well . . . Sorry, George." Al was embarrassed, too.

George said, "She still *looks* scared to me."

"*That's* what drives you nuts," Al said. "She gets into one of these things and she keeps it up and keeps it up. You got no idea. I've even thought, sometimes," he added gloomily, "I oughta try to get her to see some psychiatrist or something. I mean, she's cute. She's an awful cute girl. But why does she think it's so cute to tell these whoppers? She laughs like hell when it's over, you know. She expects you to *like* being fooled, and, if you ask me, that's nutty. Or, it could be. Maybe I don't have a sense of humor. I dunno."

George mumbled sympathetically.

"The things she tells . . ." Al shook his head.

"And yet . . ." George began cautiously. "Take tonight . . ."

"Wait a minute. I'll tell you why there's no 'and yet,' and no 'take tonight,' either. Use your head, George. Why doesn't she tell the police? Did you stop and wonder? According to her, she saw somebody get murdered or close to it. So there ought to be a corpse or its rough equivalent back there in that alley. Right? Well, does she run up to the first cop and say anything about it? Or even that somebody might need a doctor? What anybody's practically bound to do? Oh no. *She* doesn't. She just trots along and keeps her date like nothing's happened. You know why, don't you?" asked Al bitterly. "Because nothing *did* happen. And I'm getting fed up, I'm telling you. Fun's fun, but I'm getting fed up."

For the first time, George totally accepted the idea that it was all a tall story, a lie, a fantasy. He said, "Funny kind of fun, if you ask me."

"Yeah."

"Well, watch your step, Al."

"Yeah, I know." Their eyes met. She was Al's girl and Al's problem.

The girls came along, with fresh bright lips, all smiling, and the men drained their glasses.

On the sidewalk there was a debate. Rita said, a trifle acidly and with her smile failing, that it was pretty late, and she would just as soon call it a night, if nobody minded.

Nobody argued long. George began to wave at cabs. "Where do you live, Rita? Peggy?"

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Rita said she lived uptown. Peggy said, "East 39th." George was host in the matter of the cab, so he asked what number on 39th and Al told him the number.

But then Al suddenly said, "Hey, let's walk across town. O.K., girls? Why don't we walk as far as Peggy's? Do us all good." George felt at once that Al was right. The uneasiness, the unjelled quality of the whole evening, was a pity. Maybe the four of them, walking these few blocks together, but two by two, rambling and chattering, would still find a little of the pleasure the night had promised.

So when the girls agreed and the hovering cab had veered away, George tucked the tall girl's arm under his, and Al did the same with Peggy. They began to stroll east in the night that never, in this part of town, had any real darkness.

In and out of mild shadows they passed — passed the closed faces of the shops and the mysterious doors between them. The tall ones walked behind, where George, trying to make it up to Rita, was giving her his attention, being pleasant, although there was no spark between them. He thought to himself, She's a darned nice girl, but I don't want any part of her.

He almost stumbled into Al, an angry stubborn Al, standing still on the corner, with his fists on his hip bones, looking back the way they had come and saying, "Where?"

Peggy clawed at his shoulder. "Oh, don't . . . Al, don't . . . Don't pay any attention . . . Maybe if you don't . . ."

Al said, "*Where's* this guy that's following us? You see him, George? You see him Rita? This character from the restaurant?"

On the long block behind, at so late an hour, few people could be seen. And none of them moved without an air of personal purpose; none seemed to bear any relation to the four of them, bunched in a patch of light, looking back.

Peggy was crying. Little sobs escaped her. "You didn't see the look he gave me. You don't know. You don't believe me. But he has to. He has to! He has to do *something* about me."

"*I* got to do something about you," said Al grimly.

She looked at George. He made himself as cold and far as he felt. Then he said quietly, "There was a man hurt in that alley. But you didn't try to do anything for him, such as call a doctor. Did you?"

Her lips parted in a soundless "oh," an expression of satisfaction, as if now at last she understood his sudden coolness. She said, "No, because a doctor couldn't have done anything. Don't you see?"

"You mean he was dead?" George's voice jumped.

And Peggy nodded. Then he saw what she was doing with her right hand, rubbing the fingertips on the fabric of her jacket, and the word "blood" came into his head.

"Oh, sure, I suppose little-old-you

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went way back in this dark alley and felt his pulse, eh?" Al was disgusted. "Aw, don't be so damn silly! Listen. Right now, right this minute, we're going to get a cop. I swore I wasn't going to let you get me into one of these again, but we'll get a cop. We'll report this dead man. That's your duty. We're going to do it. Where's a cop?"

Peggy said, almost dreamily, "Will a cop save me?"

"Sure. He'll save you from all this nothing," said Al. "Because there won't be any corpse in the alley. I'll be the jackass, as usual. But come on . . ."

Peggy stiffened. She was facing the three of them, but she kept looking past all their figures. She said, "I was kidding." Then her voice went high and hysterical, "I've got nothing to *tell*. I don't want a cop. I'm just nervous, that's all. There's nothing the matter. Nothing at all." She was screaming it. "I just want to go home and be quiet," she cried.

"That's better," said Al savagely, "and that's where you're going and that's what you're going to be. Quiet." He took her arm and lunged off the curb with her.

George stood still. He was upset and puzzled and sorry about the whole thing.

Rita said, coolly, "That's the end of that one, I guess. Shall we get a cab and go on our way?"

"No," he said uneasily, "We better walk along."

The place where Peggy lived was a converted house, thin and tall, touching its neighbors. Peggy and Al were standing on the sidewalk in front of the steps. Peggy was calm. She was bearing the whip of Al's angry voice meekly.

"Do you live alone?" George said to her without preliminary, as they came up.

"I have a room-mate. I don't suppose she's in, though. She works real late." Peggy looked behind her at the steep stoop.

"Want us to go in and look around?" George sounded crisp and business-like.

"Sure. Let her make a monkey out of *you*," Al said.

"No," said Peggy. "I'm all right." But she looked vague and troubled. "I guess I'm all right now."

"Good night, then," said Al brusquely, "and goodbye. I'm sorry, Peggy, but that's the way it is."

"All right, Al. I'm sorry, too."

"You guys want to drop me?" Al twisted away to the curb and looked down the street for a taxi. He was bristling with rejection and parting.

"Good night, Peggy," said Rita coolly.

George said, "You're sure . . . ?"

The blonde lifted her strange little face to look up at him. "Thank you. It was nice . . ."

He touched her hand and again it was the fluttering bird and then it warmed and softened and squeezed and thanked him, and she said, "I hope sometime I'll see you again." Then she went up the steep stone

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steps and used a key on the door. The glass door obscured her figure as it was swallowed in the vestibule. There was a wag of light on the glass of an inner door, and Peggy was gone.

Al had a cab. Three of them climbed in. "Lemme off at Lexington and 49th," Al growled. "George, I ought to apologize to you for a night like this but I'm too upset. I'm through."

"Too bad."

"Yeah. But that's the last time. That kid's nuts!"

"Oh, I don't think so," said Rita, her fury barely controlled. "I think she wants attention, period. And doesn't care how she gets it." She added more gently, "Nothing you can do, really."

"Funny," said George uncomfortably.

"Yeah, and I'll keep away from it. That way I can keep laughing," Al said.

George McCarren was not interested in Rita's anger and he did not join Al's efforts to laugh. He sat, big and quiet, and even after Al left them, he barely spoke to the furious and uninteresting girl beside him.

He was working at a puzzle. Maybe the blonde girl *was* nuts. But suppose she wasn't — *then what?* Then she was frightened. Then Peggy *had* thought that the pale man was following her. So, Peggy *could* have believed that the pale man was within earshot of that corner. Maybe Peggy had it in her head that by her shrill and sudden speech she had been telling the pale man something. Telling him that he could trust her not to inform . . . that she had not told anyone and wouldn't tell anyone . . . that she was safe for him . . . that she didn't have to be silenced.

Something funny about it all. And afterwards, she'd been so much more calm. After that, she'd said she guessed she was all right now.

Suppose she had thought in some naïve, girlish, and foolish fashion that she had been saving herself! He knew now that this was his impression, and either it was true, or it was still a part of the act.

He told the cab to wait while he took the dark girl to her door. They said polite good nights with polite hints of future meetings, but they knew they would never meet again.

He got into the cab. "Back where we came from," he told the driver. "39th St."

All the way he kept veering between doubt and belief. When he doubted, he smiled a little cynically. She'd got rid of Al, hadn't she? She'd thanked George and given him an invitation. Well? Maybe she had made it all up just for him. But then she must have seen him at the table from far away, and made up her mind to do it, awfully early, to arrive in such a flurry of nerves, and take his drink, as she had done.

So again he veered, and believed it. And then he felt guilty for submitting to the persuasion of Rita's jealousy and maybe even Al's jealousy or Al's slipping hold. And he felt scared.

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All he knew was, *he had to make sure.*

But when he stood alone in that quiet block, looking up at the face of the dark house, he could not bring himself to hurry. He kept veering. He went up the steep steps and then down. Up again, down again.

He just couldn't decide.

How was he going to make sure?

There was only one way. He'd just have to ring her bell.

He found it. 3C, upstairs, probably at the back. He'd have to go up there.

What if she had been fooling and she laughed like hell (as Al said)? Was George going to like that? Even if she did twist it into a flattering thing and say that she'd told it merely to interest him? *Did* it interest him? If that was all it was? Cruel fooling, playing on a man's decent wish to protect a woman . . .

But suppose she hadn't been fooling. He'd better kinda hurry it up.

So he veered for the last time, and started up the steps, just as the inner glass door showed a glimmer of motion. He hesitated. A figure was coming out, through the vestibule. The outer door began to swing.

And air sucked sharply into his chest.

The man coming out of Peggy's house was the same pale and cadaverous stranger who had been in the restaurant.

Coming *out!*

The whole thing was suddenly clear to him. Peggy's address, asked for and called out, on the street in front of the restaurant. This man never had to follow! He could have gone ahead of them! He could have passed them and got in by pushing the wrong buzzer and been waiting upstairs when she, feeling so foolishly secure, had begun to climb. The gaunt stranger never heard it at all, her pitiful attempt to reassure him. Or, if he'd heard it, he'd paid no heed. Because he was *here!* And now he was finished and coming away. . . .

George bounded up the steps and seized the man in gray by his coat edges.

"Hey!" the man said, turning his sallow face, his lips moving.

"What did you do to her?" George's voice was so thick with fright and guilt and fury that he hardly knew it as his own. He now had his foot in the door's arc. He shook the man powerfully with one hand, then heaved and flung him out of the way. With his leg holding the door, George saw the man in gray fall down the steps. Then he saw a cab and yelled at the driver. "Get a cop! Get a doctor!"

Then he forgot the man, the law, the street, and everything but the little blonde girl who had cried wolf too many times and who had gone in, all alone, through these doors.

He burst through them now. The inner one had no lock. He started to run up the stairs. It was a long first flight and then a long run back to where the stairs began again. There was a line of light under the door marked 3C, but the door was closed and locked. He threw himself on it.

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Strong and loud and alarmed, a woman's voice said, "Who is it? Who's out there?"

"George McCarren. Let me in. Where's Peggy?"

She opened the door. She had been putting her hair up in little steel clips. She wore pajamas and her face was covered lightly with shining grease. She stood there, holding a strand of hair in her fingers, twisting it, smiling at him. "Hello," she said.

Then the dimpling began, the play under her skin. All the hints were of the same secret. "I am Peggy. I am the most fascinating thing in all the world. I am young and blonde and female. There is no other drama like the one in me. You, for instance, have no feelings of any importance. Nor has anyone else. But my feelings — these you must wonder at. You must be aware of them. Watch me. Guess about me. Be fascinated. I will lead you the merriest and happiest dance, if you will live in my world. Oh, yes, if you want to, you can come in and adore me, too."

He wanted to kill her.

He thought she was the most evil thing he had ever seen.

"That man who was in the restaurant," he croaked. "You know him."

Her face quivered.

"He was here," George shouted.

"Oh, no, he wasn't." She was quick to catch what he was thinking.

"Here," George insisted, but hopelessly, because she was such a liar.

"Why, he lives on the first floor," she said scathingly, her whole face perfectly scornful. "That's why he nodded to me."

And now she was going to laugh at him. Oh, sure. Dimple so pretty. Sparkling eyes. Hint of mirth-helpless body rocking into his arms. Hint. Withdrawal. Tease. Cruel. Play. He saw her lips parting over her teeth — teeth that now seemed to him like a cat's mean little teeth.

He turned away jerkily and started back downstairs.

Now he was going to have to apologize to an outraged stranger. (Just try — just try to explain!) Or he was going to find out that the stranger wasn't really a stranger, and was still down there, still laughing. In on the joke.

George swallowed, trying to control the sick rage inside of him. Take it easy, now.

There was somebody out there.

He pushed the doors, slowly.

The man on the stoop was a cop.

George pulled himself together as well as he could, tried to dismiss the air of storm and violence that hung around him. It was all a rib. One had to be a sport. No harm done. Just get rid of this sense of evil — an evil that ought to be smashed. His hurt feelings were 90 per cent of it. Be civilized. Leave your feelings out of it. Apologize to the man — and laugh it off.

Somebody said, below him, "There he is! That's the one!"

George heard a siren. He saw the gray heap at the foot of the stone steps.

The cop spoke sharply. "This man is dead," he said. "What about that?"

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Inspector Hazlerigg vs.
The Man Who Made the Beauties

BACK IN FIVE YEARS

by MICHAEL GILBERT

IN THE EARLY THIRTIES, WHEN I WAS a junior Inspector attached to the uniformed branch in a North London division, there were a number of known counterfeiters at work in London. I don't mean that we knew their names and addresses, for they tend to be shy people, but a surprising number of facts about them and their products were filed and tabulated at the Criminal Records Office and in the M.O. file.

There were forgers of Post Office Savings books, and there were those who specialized in passports and share certificates. But the kings of the trade were the forgers and utterers of bank-notes. And the king of them all was a certain shy, unobtrusive genius who manufactured the "Beauties."

His identity was, of course, a mystery. He was known to us only by his £1-notes, finely etched and most scrupulously printed.

In a lot of ways they were a better product than the stuff being turned out by H.M. Mint. That young lady who sits up in an inset in the top left-hand corner (on the genuine pound notes she looks rather a pudding-faced young person) — well, in his productions she was a miracle of dignified beauty. That's why we called them "Beautiful Britannias," or "Beauties."

And you can take it from me that there wasn't a policeman in the Metropolis who wouldn't have given his belt and buttons for a chance to lay hands on the artist.

However, as it happens — and as it happens in most police work — it wasn't one man or even a few men who got on the track of the forger. When this happy event finally came to pass it was the result of a combination of luck and instinct backed up by the hard, slogging work of a great number of people.

We had regretfully decided that in the case of the Beauties we were up against one of those rarities in the field of crime — an entirely solitary and single-handed operator; a man with at least one god-like attribute, the strength which is said to come from loneliness.

He must have made his own plate — it may have taken him a year or more of patient trial and error, cutting, smoothing, and sizing. He even had a rotation system which enabled him to change the numbering.

But it was his method of distribution that put him at the top of the class.

Having printed a number of very excellent pound notes, he rationed himself to about twenty a week.

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These he would cash personally, going to shops and post offices all over London, and never to the same one twice. He would purchase some small object costing not more than a few pence or a shilling, pay with a pound note, and pocket the change.

The system was laborious, but almost foolproof. And, but for one small thing, I really have my doubts whether we should have got on to him.

The thing was he had a weakness for pawnbrokers. Perhaps it was because pawnbrokers' shops are places which have a wide variety of things which you can pick up for a small sum: and they are usually rather dark and not very crowded and don't make difficulties about change. Anyway, it proved his undoing.

For pawnbrokers, as you may know, are people who like to work very closely with the police. There's nothing underhanded about it. It just happens to pay both sides. There's a Pawnbrokers' List of Stolen Articles which we publish at Scotland Yard, and most pawnbrokers make a practice of reporting anything suspicious to the local station. The local police, in return, keep a special eye on their shops, which are a tempting target to the light-fingered fraternity.

Well, over the months and years, reports piled up of these pound notes being received by pawnbrokers. So, just on the chance (that's a phrase which features pretty prominently in police work), a letter was sent round to all pawnbrokers saying that if they should happen to notice a man or woman coming into their shop who wasn't a regular customer, and who wanted to make a small purchase and proffered a brand-new pound note for it, then would they please make a careful note of his description, etc., etc.

After a time the descriptions started to add up. It was extraordinarily fascinating, sitting back in an office watching a living person being built up out of fractions, watching his features line themselves in, and his identity declare itself.

We got a picture of a man, middle-sized to small, plump, soft-spoken, with white, pudgy hands, strong black hair and weak, rather peering eyes. His clothes naturally varied from time to time and from place to place but the essentials were the same.

A very wide and elaborate net was then spread. I won't bore you with all the details, but you can gather the scope of it when I tell you it meant stationing policemen within call of almost every pawnshop which had not yet been visited and arranging a simple system of signals with the pawnbrokers themselves.

And that was how, at the beginning of June, 194–, the police at last caught sight of Mr. Mountjoy and followed him discreetly home to 14 Malpas Street. This proved to be a small shop in North London, with living quarters attached, and an independent flat over it.

Some further facts now came to light. All seemed to point to the one

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conclusion. To start with, Mr. Mountjoy's business was that of a one-man printer and typemaker; very suitable, we felt, allowing its owner to possess and operate various small machines and lathes without exciting suspicion. Then again, he was a solitary man, who, according to Mr. Crump, of 12 Malpas Street, his nearest neighbor, spent much of his time out of his shop, apparently on journeys round London.

"Looking for commissions, I expect," said Mr. Crump. "Not that he seems to get much work. Manages to do very well for himself, none the less."

I was in charge of these local inquiries, and sensing a certain amount of rancor in that last remark, I guessed that there might be some trade rivalry. Mr. Crump was a news-agent and printer himself. However, he was unable to help me much, because he didn't know very much. But he did say that Mr. Mountjoy seemed to do a lot of work at night.

In some trepidation, because we didn't want to expose our hand too soon, I tried Mrs. Ireland, who lived in the flat over Mr. Mountjoy's shop. She was a middle-aged party, intensely respectable and slightly deaf. I visited her one morning in the well-worn guise of an inspector of gas meters, and found her surprisingly willing to talk.

She, unlike Mr. Crump, had the very highest opinion of Mr. Mountjoy. Possibly he *was* one who kept himself to himself but there was no harm that she could see in that. Better than clumping about sticking your nose into what didn't concern you. This, I gathered, was a back-hander at Mr. Crump, whom she didn't like. Unfortunately, her deafness prevented her from being able to corroborate the story of night work.

Well, there it was. You now know all that we knew at that point and you can see how we were fixed. I had no doubt in my mind. The description fitted. The set-up was exactly what we had imagined. The printer's shop — the night work — the journeys round London.

There was only one thing to do — take a search warrant and chance the odds.

Accordingly, on Midsummer Day, 194–, just after 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I took Sergeant Husband with me and walked over to Malpas Street to put the matter to the test. And as I turned into the road the first thing that struck my eye was that damned notice and I realized that we had missed our man. How narrowly we had missed him became apparent as we pursued our inquiries.

The notice? It was pinned to the door of the shop. Written in a copperplate hand on a neat white card, it said: *BACK IN FIVE YEARS.*

No. 14 was the end house of a block of seven. It had the shop entrance in front, and an independent side entrance which led up to Mrs. Ireland's flat.

Now the curious thing was this. Five minutes before we had arrived,

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several people had seen Mr. Mountjoy come out and pin that notice on his door. But after that no one could say which way he had gone. This didn't all come out at once, but inquiries in the street, then and later, only deepened the mystery.

For instance, Mrs. Ireland had been sitting at her window, which overlooked the point where the side street joined the main. Although she might be deaf, she certainly wasn't short-sighted and she happened to have been keeping her eyes open for the postman. She was prepared to swear that Mr. Mountjoy had neither passed the end of the side road nor gone down it.

Suppose, therefore, he had turned to the left outside his front door? But Mr. Crump in No. 12, and the barber in No. 8 had both been in their shops the whole time and were positive that he had not gone past them.

Had he gone back into his shop or the living-room behind it? But these were most undeniably empty, and had, besides, the sort of "packed-up" appearance of rooms whose owner has left them deliberately. The gas and electricity were turned off, the larder was empty.

There was a door leading into the garden, and this was locked. That, by itself, didn't prove anything, of course, but the garden was a dead end. There was a very high, glass-bottle-topped wall on the street side, the blank elevation of another house at the end, and a garden full of little Crumps on the right.

Mr. Mountjoy, in fact, had walked into the street, pinned up his famous notice, and then dematerialized.

But, unlike the conjurer's lady assistant, he not only disappeared, he stayed disappeared. And that is not such an easy thing to do — not in this country, anyway, especially when the police are on the lookout for you and have your full description.

However, as with everything else, Mr. Mountjoy managed it competently enough.

The police force, like the Army, believes in moving its executives around, and it wasn't until well over four years later — nearly five — that I found myself back at the same North London police station, attached this time to the plainclothes branch.

One of the first places I visited was Malpas Street, and there, still, was the notice: *BACK IN FIVE YEARS.*

In a district like that you'd have imagined that it would have been torn down long ago. But it hadn't.

I gathered, in fact, that it had become a sort of local tradition. Mr. Mountjoy had always been a mystery man to the neighborhood, and his reputation had been nowise diminished by his dramatic disappearance and the interest of the police in his whereabouts.

There was a strong local feeling, amounting almost to an obsession, that five years after his disappearance (on the very day and at the very hour) Mr. Mountjoy would reappear and take that notice down again.

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What would happen then no one could suggest.

I asked the station sergeant about the place. For instance, why hadn't it been relet or taken over by the authorities? Mr. Mountjoy, I gathered, owned the building but the taxes must be mounting up and anyway it was a nice little shop and living quarters. We didn't talk about requisitioning in those days, but we had some powers. Apparently, however, all this had been foreseen by Mr. Mountjoy.

The day before he disappeared he had handed to Mrs. Ireland a sum in notes (genuine ones this time) sufficient to deal with all forseeable expenses *for exactly five years*. At the end of that time, he said, if he hadn't come back she could sell the house and keep the proceeds. And he had even executed a legal document enabling her to do this.

In short, she was to wait for him for five years, and at the end of that time, like the frog in the fairy story, she was to have her reward — unless the fairy prince had reappeared to claim his own.

It sounded pretty fantastic to me.

The next thing that happened, about three weeks later, was the arrival at the station of a badly worried Mr. Crump, with a tale that No. 14 was haunted.

He was so clear about it that we gave more attention to his story than the police usually accord to psychic manifestations. Also, of course, we were interested in that particular house.

"Scraping, cutting, and emery-papering," said Mr. Crump, his great red face moist but earnest. "Every night — about midnight or 1 o'clock. Just like he used to. I don't like it. Nor the wife don't like it. She's talking of moving if it isn't stopped."

"Did you go down and look in?" I asked. "Was there a light on in the shop?"

"Of course there wasn't no light on," said Mr. Crump. "Hasn't the electricity been cut off? I've told you, it's not yooman, this noise isn't."

When I suggested that it might be rats, I thought Mr. Crump was going to detonate, so I hurriedly promised him that we'd look into it and he departed.

We had the keys of the shop, so I let myself in that evening, going after dark to avoid causing any undue stir. I took a torch and made a thorough investigation. It was obvious no one had been there. The dust was inches thick over everything, and the place — well, it *smelt* deserted, if you know what I mean.

When I came out I found half Malpas Street gathered outside armed with sticks and bottles. Apparently a small boy had seen my torch flashing and the crowd were just summoning up courage to break in and lay the ghost when I stepped out.

After that, of course, there was no stopping the stories.

Mr. Crump appeared about a month later with an ultimatum.

Either the police "did something" or he was going to clear out himself.

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He couldn't stand it any longer. His wife had already gone on an indefinite visit to her married sister and trade was falling off. The sinister reputation of No. 14 was beginning to corrupt No. 12.

"All right," I said at last. "I'll come along myself tonight and we'll both listen."

When I came off duty at about half-past 10 that evening, I walked along to Malpas Street and Mr. Crump let me in. We sat in his parlor, which was on the first floor overlooking the street, and we drank beer and talked for a bit, and at midnight, at my suggestion, we turned the lights out and made ourselves comfortable in chairs near the window.

After a bit I must have dozed, because I woke up to feel Mr. Crump gripping my arm.

He said nothing, but I gathered from his breathing, which he was trying to control, that something had happened.

Then, in the stuffy blackness of the room, I heard it, too. It was a thin intermittent burr, which sounded like a very sharp edge cutting across some tough substance. Then came the sound of scraping, and then the cutting started again.

I jumped up, leaped at the door, nearly broke my neck on the stairs, and three seconds later I was out in the street. I had my key at the ready and I snapped open the door of No. 14 and switched on my torch.

There was no one there. Nothing had been disturbed at all. There wasn't even the trace of a rat or mouse paw in the dust. I hadn't thought that there would be. There had been something indefinably human about that sound.

When I got back to Mr. Crump, I found he had turned on the light and poured out some more beer. He seemed much more cheerful. I think that half his trouble had been that no one believed his story.

Also, as we were finishing our beer, he said something which surprised me.

"Thanks be," he said. "I've only to put up with it for one more week."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Work it out for yourself," he said. "It's the seventeenth of June. Four years and 51 weeks ago he left. Said he'd be back in five years. Very methodical man was Mr. Mountjoy."

I could find no comment to make.

It was quite illogical and fantastic, and I felt that we were making fools of ourselves, but in the end I agreed, weakly, to post two sergeants to watch the back of the house while I kept an unobtrusive eye on the front.

If Mr. Mountjoy was going to maintain his reputation for punctuality he was due in the street at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Accordingly, at five to 4 I turned the corner at the far end of the road and started strolling nonchalantly towards No. 14, stopping every now and then to look in at the various shop windows.

It was a true midsummer day, warm and windless, and the children were still in school, so that by Malpas Street standards it was almost quiet.

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I looked at my watch and saw that it was just short of 4 o'clock. And Malpas Street was still most definitely empty.

At that moment, in the warm summer silence, I heard it again. I want to be quite clear about this. It was exactly and undeniably the same sound that I had heard that night when I sat up over Mr. Crump's shop. But it did not come from No. 14.

It was from the same side of the street but much lower down.

I moved cautiously along until I could locate it. It came from the barber's shop at No. 8, where Toni Etrillo, the barber, was shaving one of his swarthy compatriots. The burr and the rasp as the razor passed across the strong black stubble — these were unmistakable.

And in that moment the secret of Mr. Mountjoy's disappearance became as abundantly clear to me.

The first thing I did was purely symbolical. I took out my knife and levered out the tack which held up that notice. I was about to tear it up but thought better of it and dropped it in my pocket.

Conscious that a dozen pairs of eyes were watching from curtained windows, I went round into the side street and rang Mrs. Ireland's doorbell.

When she opened the door I didn't do anything dramatic; I just beckoned her out into the street and signaled to one of the sergeants to accompany us, and we all walked back to the police station.

For the greater part of the way we were silent, but I felt, in justice, that one thing had to be said.

"A marvelously well kept-up impersonation, Mr. Mountjoy. It's nothing new for a man to dress as a woman, and I have even heard of cases before where a landlord became his own lodger. But — it's a great mistake for any man to do his shaving last thing at night."

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A gripping story in the **Black Mask** *tradition*

DAY NEVER CAME

by STEVE FISHER

A LITTLE RAIN FELL, MAKING NOISE on the roof; then it stopped, and they could hear the sound of guns not too far in the distance; and from the barred windows they could see eastern Shanghai, wrapped in flame. Now and again a squadron of Japanese planes roared over them, and they waited, expecting bombs; because anything could happen now. It was an American marine station, sure, but it was small; and if you were color-blind, you couldn't see the flag that was draped nineteen feet across the roof. There had been the *Panay*, and some oil boats; so you couldn't depend on anything. They, the prisoners, locked in their six by six cells, were most afraid because they were helpless, and they couldn't do anything if the place burst into flames; they couldn't move.

The company of marines in the barracks could look out for itself. It was the prisoners that got the lousy deal. And what were they in for? Petty, routine charges, punishment handed down from the old discipline of peacetime, as though, because they were Americans, there was no war now, and everything was just the same. Ten-day, fifteen-day sentences for being A. W. O. L., or for throwing your chow in a top sergeant's face. Just one here was charged seriously, and he was waiting for a general court-martial. This one was Clark.

Clark was in the navy, but when he was arrested, he had been wearing civilian clothing and he was still wearing it. He had been attached to this station as a communication yeoman. He sat in the cell, never saying anything. Most of the time he was on the iron bunk, sitting with his legs drawn up by his chest, his arms around his knees, staring across the shadow of the bars that slanted on the cement floor. His face was white, too white, though not unhandsome; and his eyes were dark; he had black curly hair; his lips were thin and bitter and cruel.

Clark kept his mouth shut, thinking. He was charged with espionage.

When supper came, the guy in the next cell began to raise the devil. He said: "Take your lousy bread and water and stick it up the C. O.'s shirt."

The man in the cell just the other side of Clark joined in, saying: "When are you going to let us out of this rat hole? When are they going to move this cheesecloth com-

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pany of leathernecks somewhere that's safe?"

"Soon," said the marine who had brought in the bread and water. "The order may come any time now."

"Soon!" the guy in the next cell jeered. "We've heard that for days. The order'll come to move any time day or night. The marines'll desert this hell hole for a battleship — which is where they belong. But it's a dirty lie! We won't move until hell blows us off this earth! Until flames roast us in these six by six pots of iron! God in Heaven — let us out!"

The talk went on, but Clark took his bread and water, ate and drank, and didn't say anything.

The hours passed and daylight was sponged up by the blackness of night. The prisoners paced restlessly for a while, watching through the window as the flaring red of Shanghai beat jaggedly into the sky, but they at last resigned themselves to sleep. All but Clark.

Midnight came and the sentry watch was changed. The new sentry made the rounds to see that all was well. Clark was standing at his cell door now.

"Hey."

The marine stopped.

"What do you want?" he whispered.

"Cigarette."

The marine was affable and gave him one. Clark put it in his mouth and waited for a light. His eyes shone through the darkness.

"Your trial comes off tomorrow?"

"That's right," said Clark.

"Guilty?"

"No," Clark said, "they'll never prove me guilty."

The marine lighted Clark's cigarette.

"I heard," the marine went on, "that you were getting confidential messages in your office as communication yeoman, and that you were selling the stuff to a ring of foreign agents. I mean, brother, if you beat that ——"

"What proof have they?" Clark asked sharply. "They've made no other arrests and they —— Say, listen. I feel lousy. I mean, I'd like to go to the Heads and wash up and so forth. How about it?"

"Sure."

This was routine. The marine unlocked the cell, and Clark moved out into the corridor and started for the Heads. But he stopped halfway and stood very still as though he had a pain in his heart. When the marine had closed in the space between them, Clark whirled around. His fist lashed out, landed on the point of the marine's jaw. Clark caught the sentry as he caved, quickly lifted him over his shoulder, and carried him out.

He cut back from the barracks of tents, moved into tall grass, and dumped his load. Then he bent and fumbled for the marine's knife, and the keys to the cells. He put the keys in his pocket, but the knife he opened. He hesitated an instant, holding the blade over the unconscious man's throat, considering the murder which was included in all of his carefully

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made plans. This, so far, was easy; and yet he had known how it would be. They were accustomed to dealing with prisoners whose offenses were petty, not with desperate men; they hadn't anticipated any trouble, and so the marine had been taken off guard.

For a moment Clark considered changing his plans. This could be an escape without murder. He could get away, he could flee into war-torn Shanghai; if he was lucky, he might somehow get through to Siberia. But there would be passport trouble. There would be hiding, running; running away from both war and United States agents.

No, his first plan was best. He must kill, and then he must go on with everything just as he had intended. He must return and go through with tomorrow's trial. There would be time enough to try to escape if the trial went wrong. But it wouldn't. There had been no other arrests, and there was only one witness. He would eliminate that witness tonight.

Quickly now, he told himself; and he drove the blade of the knife into the marine's throat. Then, crouching there, Clark waited, hearing the far-off boom of guns.

He had until four when the watch would be changed. It was a small station, here only temporarily, and one sentry had always been enough for the brig. Clark took out his handkerchief and wiped his fingerprints from the blade of the knife, telling himself that no one would miss him. No one would ever know that he had been out of his cell.

He rose, looked around again, and then he cut across the territory, crawled under the hole in the fence, and moved toward Shanghai.

He had reached the city in less than half an hour, but now he was crouched against a building, watching planes zoom across the sky, waiting with his teeth set, for the next bomb to drop. Debris showered around him like heavy hail; he saw a woman lying on the street reaching out for an arm which had been cut off in the explosion of a second ago; he saw corpses, — everywhere there were corpses. And then the planes droned off through the night and Clark started again. In his civilian clothes, he was like any other white man, and no one stopped to look at him twice.

He moved coldly, seeing but not thinking of the scene which reeled past him, for his emotion was tied up in his own plan and purpose, and as always, the pain of others was removed from him. He had no fear. If he died, then he died, and that would be that. But as long as he lived, he was looking out for himself. He took his living and his world without the hurrah of emotion. To him patriotism was hysteria, honor was a thing by which to cheat fools, and truth was a foil for deception. These things he believed although he did not look upon himself as very different from his fellows. He had come to accept his own corruptibility.

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He had commenced selling confidential messages on the day of his first offer. There was nothing to it. It was easy, the pay was big: so why not? As long as there was money in his pocket and things came his way, why should he trouble himself with the struggle of what men called nations? It was only regrettable that he had confided some of his secrets to a girl and as a result had been arrested. But they would prove absolutely nothing against him.

He was on his way to kill the girl.

Half running through the streets now, watching to see that he went in the right direction, he remembered that he had been cheating since childhood. First he stole marbles and when he couldn't steal them, he beat up his weaker companions and took what he wanted. Later he stole money from his mother; and after that he had taken his brother's car out and wrecked it. From birth he'd had no conscience. He had read that there was such a thing, but the word baffled him and he secretly doubted that it was anything but a bugaboo. If you could get away with a thing, why worry about it?

He slowed now, because he was coming into the International Settlement. There was rush and confusion here too, but not so much, and he moved along at an easy gait. There were no Chinese with their babies on their backs, and their chickens and geese following them, and their goats and cows to clutter up the street. He liked it better in the settlement.

He thought once of the station, and the brig with the prisoners yelling for safety. He smiled with this thought: what fools he would make of them all!

He came then to the apartment in which the girl lived. It was a small place, and there was no doorman, so he went inside and climbed the padded stairs to the second floor. He went all the way to the end of the corridor and rang the bell.

She answered the door herself.

He stood there for a fraction of a second and looked at her because she was beautiful. Reddish hair, turned up at the ends; blue eyes that were very wide and accentuated by the pale white of her skin; the slim ivory of her throat; and her lips which were carmine, and half-parted now, in surprise.

"Clark," she said, "I didn't ——"

He pushed her back and moved in through the door. He let it shut, then he leaned back against it and put the sole of his foot on the panel. He saw that bags were in the middle of the floor and she had been packing.

"Hello, Liz," he said slowly. He raised his right eyebrow, cocked it. "Leaving, I see," he went on. "Getting out while the getting is good, eh?"

"I've been ordered to evacuate," she said. "Clark, what's the matter with you?"

He walked across the room, picked up a cigarette, then continued walking until he was at the window. He pulled the shade, and turned around, putting the cigarette in his mouth.

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He let it dangle there in his lips, unlighted.

He didn't like having to see her like this: not because he pitied her — there was no pity in his heart for anyone — but because she was beautiful. It gave him a proud pleasure to know that she was his girl; it did his ego good. It wasn't every sailor that rated a schoolteacher and he knew it. She'd been packing because tomorrow she'd move aboard the *Houston* where the court-martial was to be held. She'd live there until the trial was over, until she had given the very last shred of evidence against him. And what was the evidence but the things he had told her? That, though, was enough. He wasn't afraid of the case the naval intelligence had built up. He was afraid of what she would have to say. He hadn't imagined at the time that it meant anything to her, but she must have been more astute than he thought.

"So they've ordered your evacuation?" he said slowly.

"Yes, dear, they have. I —— What's the matter with you?"

"The matter is you're lying."

"I'm not! I didn't expect to see you. If I seem to be acting queerly, it's only because of that — because I've tried so desperately to see you — to get in touch with you, and ——"

"You're lying!"

She just stared at him.

"You turned me in, you little tramp," he went on; "right now you're so scared you don't know which way to turn!"

She shrank back, touched a desk. He saw a pad on which she had been writing. But he had no eyes for it. He moved across the room, took her by the shoulders. He kissed her neck, and then he reached up and let his fingers sink into the skin of her throat.

He didn't like to see the terror on her face, the horror that was reflected in her eyes. She struggled against him and as he held her, choking her, she fought so hard that before he was through, the veins stood out on his temples. His face was almost blue by the time he let go of her and she dropped silently to the carpeted floor. He stood and looked down, knowing that she was dead, and that he had killed her.

He took his handkerchief and wiped his hands, and then he wiped the woodwork around the door. He knew that he must flee. He would have to get back. The earlier he got into the cell the better his chances of going undiscovered.

Until now he had been cool, deliberate; but he felt a nervousness growing in him. He didn't know the reason for this and he was irritated.

He took a final look around the room and his eyes fell on the pad on which she had been writing. He saw that it said *Diary*. Written evidence. He picked it up and put it into his pocket, then he used the handkerchief to turn the knob of the door. Looking up and down the hall, he tiptoed quietly out of the apartment and into the street.

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The station was shrouded in darkness, and in comparison with the city it seemed bleak and barren. Clark crawled in under the fence and moved along on his stomach now, afraid that he might attract attention, and that someone would shoot him.

His blood was hot, his heart pounded against his side. He felt as though he were running a fever. He did not know why, but from the time he had murdered Liz, this high excitement had pulsated through him. It had become so difficult to breathe that he thought now and again he would suffocate.

He reached a clearing at last, and rising, he ran to the brig. He went in quickly, put the key into the heavy iron lock, and turned it. Then he went rapidly outside again, hunting around in the tall grass until he found the corpse of the marine. He stooped and attached the keys.

The cell door was one that locked automatically when it closed; so he could return and close it, and because he was rid of the keys, no one would ever guess that he had been out.

He finished with the corpse and raced back to the cell. The only sound was the clicking of the door after him. He heard nothing else: nothing but the distant rumble of guns.

He breathed easier. It was done. He had killed a marine and a girl. But obviously, that was impossible. No court in the world could convict him; no one dared even to suspect — for such a suspicion would be ridiculed. He had the best alibi on earth: he had been locked in his cell all during the night!

Even if he had left minute clues behind, it would be impossible for them to shatter this alibi. The marine's murder would be blamed on one or a dozen things; the death of Liz in Shanghai would be a mystery in a city which was already too burdened with trouble to be concerned. He had done everything expertly. Liz would not be there in the espionage trial to testify. He would beat that charge too, and he would be free again!

But he remembered suddenly the diary he had stolen. He must burn it before it was found on him. He took it out and put it on the floor, almost breathlessly, for he had nearly forgotten it. He fumbled there in the dark for matches, and found them. He lighted the first match; as it flared up, he looked down at the page, the one on which she had been writing:

Went to the naval commandant today and pleaded for Clark, for I know he must be innocent. He couldn't be guilty. I love him and I must have him back. Tomorrow I am going to get a lawyer. I do not understand the charges, but I am sure that a lawyer will. The commandant was very kind; he said that a civilian member of the espionage ring had been arrested by British officers and had confessed, involving Clark and several other men. They all disappeared except Clark, and Clark was arrested. But there must be some mistake. Those

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things Clark used to tell me about messages and meetings couldn't have anything to do with —— No, I won't believe it. I love him, and he is innocent. Surely, with a good lawyer I will be able to save him ——

He had turned three pages by now, and he had used several matches. His eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks were burning. He felt a choking in his throat, as though he were going to scream, but he forced it down. He suddenly tore up the pages of the diary and put a match to them. He rose, and then stared down, like a madman, watching the paper burn.

He trampled on the ashes, and he was shaking. He sat down on the iron bunk and held his head in his hands and thought. Liz was dumb. He had always known she was dumb. But when they had told him that American naval officers had made no other arrests, he had supposed the members of the spy ring had escaped and he could think only of Liz. But he had been wrong. Liz had been packing to evacuate the city, not to go aboard the *Houston* for a trial. Liz had loved him.

"Love?" he said aloud.

Then he laughed, for he realized that was always the one thing he had missed; the one thing he had never in his life considered: love. He rocked back on his heels and laughed from deep in his throat; and when he stopped laughing, it was only because his heart was shoving against his side, making him want to tear it from his body. He put his hands in front of him and looked at them. It was as though he had palsy.

He sat there, numb and cold.

He did not know how long it was that he sat that way, but he became aware that it was long past 4 in the morning — and they still had not changed the sentry. The new sentry had not appeared. None of the prisoners had awakened and called out for a drink. No one had coughed. No one had breathed.

He rose, seeing a grayish murk fluttering against the darkness of the sky, and knowing that dawn was coming, and that there should be some movement. He went to the door and took hold of the bars and peered up and down, but he saw nothing.

A mounting hysteria took possession of him. He moved up and down in the cell, waiting for some sound other than the bombing and the far-off guns, but no sound came. When he could stand it no longer, he screamed out:

"Where is everybody? In the name of God, where is everybody?"

He thought this was insanity. But he got no answer to his cry and he was terrified. He shouted, he screamed. He ran up and down in the cell. He banged against the heavy iron lock of the door. There was no one around to whom he could lie, or whom he could trick to get him out. The door was iron and without ears. He crashed uselessly against it.

He knew what had happened, but he refused to admit the thought:

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They had moved during the time he was gone! The order had come through. The Japanese had warned that they expected to have fighting in this vicinity, probably by dawn, which explained the immediate evacuation. The marines had been ready and waiting for this order. They were to go with the fleet. They had undoubtedly noticed that his cell was empty and thought that he had escaped. They had not found the murdered sentry. They'd had to rush out, probably in confusion. So the place was deserted. Clark, in his excitement, and in the darkness, had noticed nothing different when he returned from Shanghai.

He ran to the window. Light was creeping across the horizon. He saw Shanghai smothering in yellow. He screamed, as though his voice would carry; but he knew that everything was deserted for miles around. He ran again to the door and beat his fists against it. Sweat had come out on his face and he was drenched in it. His eyes were wide with terror. He grasped the bars in his hands and hit his head against the iron until his whole face was bleeding. He turned around and around in the cell. His defeat was incredible. His agony was unbearable. He sank to the floor beating his fists on it like an infuriated ape. He kept screaming until the tissues of his lungs were like shreds of paper.

He knew what would happen. There was no flag now and the place would be blown to bits. He thought he heard the far-off drone of airplane motors, and he dragged himself to his feet. He was shaking. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He kept on screaming, but the screams were only hoarse whispers, and in his mind were the words written in the diary he had burned: *He must be innocent. He couldn't be guilty. I love him* ——

(Black Mask *section continued on next page***)**

Important Announcement!

EQMM's $7,500 Ninth Annual Short Story Contest Closes October 20th

The thirteen cash prizes — including a $2,000 first prize, and a special prize of $500 to go to the finest "first" story — are being offered for the best stories submitted by both amateur and professional writers. If you haven't submitted your entry yet, you'd better hurry — the deadline date is drawing near. Complete contest rules may be obtained by writing to Contest Editor, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 570 Lexington Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y.

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Black Mask Magazine . . .

Another surprising story out of Black Mask . . . This time, no tough, trench-coated 'tecs, no gangsters and gore, no hardboiled hammerlocks. But there are other kinds of hard-muscled stories — stories of hard, brutal meanness . . . of hard, implacable murder in a smokehouse . . .

CRY SILENCE

by FREDRIC BROWN

IT WAS THAT OLD SILLY ARGUMENT about sound. If a tree falls deep in the forest where there is no ear to hear, is its fall silent? Is there sound where there is no ear to hear it? I've heard it argued by college professors and by street sweepers.

This time it was being argued by the agent at the little railroad station and a beefy man in overalls. It was a warm summer evening at dusk, and the station agent's window opening onto the back platform of the station was open; his elbows rested on the ledge of it. The beefy man leaned against the red brick of the building. The argument between them went in circles like a droning bumble bee.

I sat on a wooden bench on the platform about ten feet away. I was a stranger in town, waiting for a train that was late. There was one other man present; he sat on the bench beside me, between me and the window. He was a tall, heavy man with a face like granite, an uncompromising kind of face, and huge, rough hands. He looked like a farmer in town clothes.

I wasn't interested in either the argument or the man beside me. I was wondering only how late that damned train would be.

I didn't have my watch; it was being repaired in the city. And from where I sat I couldn't see the clock inside the station. The tall man beside me was wearing a wrist watch and I asked him what time it was.

He didn't answer.

You've got the picture, haven't you?

I got up off the bench and looked into the open door of the station. It was 7:40; the train was twelve minutes overdue. I sighed, and lighted a cigarette. I decided to stick my nose into the argument. It wasn't any of my business, but I knew the answer and they didn't.

"Pardon me for butting in," I said, "but you're not arguing about sound at all; you're arguing semantics."

I expected one of them to ask me what semantics was, but the station

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agent fooled me. He said: "That's the study of words, isn't it? In a way, you're right, I guess."

"All the way," I insisted. "If you look up 'sound' in the dictionary, you'll find two meanings listed. One of them is 'the vibration of a medium, usually air, within a certain range,' and the other is 'the effect of such vibrations on the ear.' That isn't the exact wording, but the general idea. Now by one of those definitions, the sound — the vibration — exists whether there's an ear around to hear it or not. By the other, the vibrations aren't sound unless there is an ear to hear them. So you're both right; it's just a matter of which meaning you use for the word 'sound'."

The beefy man said: "Maybe you got something there." He looked back at the agent. "Let's call it a draw then, Joe. I got to get home. So long."

He stepped down off the platform and went around the station.

I asked the agent: "Any report on the train?"

"Nope," he said. He leaned a little farther out the window and looked to his right and I saw a clock in a steeple about a block away that I hadn't noticed before. "Ought to be along soon though."

He grinned at me. "Expert on sound, huh?"

"Well," I said, "I wouldn't say that. But I did happen to look it up in the dictionary. I know what it means."

"Uh-huh. Well, let's take that second definition and say sound is sound only if there's an ear to hear it. A tree crashes in the forest and there's only a deaf man there. Is there any sound?"

"I guess not," I said. "Not if you consider sound as subjective. Not if it's got to be heard."

I happened to glance to my right, at the tall man who hadn't answered my question about the time. He was still staring straight ahead. Lowering my voice a bit, I asked the station agent: "Is he deaf?"

"Him? Bill Meyers?" He chuckled; there was something odd in the sound of that chuckle. "Mister, nobody knows. That's what I was going to ask you next. If that tree falls down and there's a man near, but nobody knows if he's deaf or not, is there any sound?"

His voice had gone up in volume. I stared at him, puzzled, wondering if he was a little crazy, or if he was just trying to continue the argument by thinking up screwy loopholes.

I said: "If nobody knows if he's deaf, nobody knows if there was any sound."

He said: "You're wrong, mister. That man would know whether he heard it or not. Maybe the tree would know, wouldn't it? And maybe other people would know, too."

"I don't get your point," I told him. "What are you trying to prove?"

"*Murder*, mister. You just got up from sitting next to a murderer."

I stared at him again, but he didn't look crazy. Far off, a train whistled, faintly. I said: "I don't understand you."

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"The guy sitting on the bench," he said. "Bill Meyers. He murdered his wife. Her and his hired man."

His voice was quite loud. I felt uncomfortable; I wished that far train was a lot nearer. I didn't know what went on here, but I knew I'd rather be on the train. Out of the corner of my eye I looked at the tall man with the granite face and the big hands. He was still staring out across the tracks. Not a muscle in his face had moved.

The station agent said: "I'll tell you about it, mister. I *like* to tell people about it. His wife was a cousin of mine, a fine woman. Mandy Eppert, her name was, before she married that skunk. He was mean to her, dirt mean. Know how mean a man can be to a woman who's helpless?

"She was seventeen when she was fool enough to marry him seven years ago. She was twenty-four when she died last spring. She'd done more work than most women do in a lifetime, out on that farm of his. He worked her like a horse and treated her like a slave. And her religion wouldn't let her divorce him or even leave him. See what I mean, mister?"

I cleared my throat, but there didn't seem to be anything to say. He didn't need prodding or comment. He went on.

"So how can you blame her, mister, for loving a decent guy, a clean, young fellow her own age, when he fell in love with her? Just *loving* him, that's all. I'd bet my life on that, because I knew Mandy. Oh, they talked, and they looked at each other — I wouldn't gamble too much there wasn't a stolen kiss now and then. But nothing to kill them for, mister."

I felt uneasy; I wished the train would come and get me out of this. I had to say something, though; the agent was waiting. I said: "Even if there had been, the unwritten law is out of date."

"Right, mister." I'd said the right thing. "But you know what that skunk sitting over there did? He went deaf."

"Huh?" I said.

"He went deaf. He came in town to see the doc and said he'd been having earaches and couldn't hear any more. Was afraid he was going deaf. Doc gave him some stuff to try, and you know where he went from the doc's office?"

I didn't try to guess.

"Sheriff's office," he said. "Told the sheriff he wanted to report his wife and his hired man were missing, see? Smart of him, wasn't it? Swore out a complaint and said he'd prosecute if they were found. But he had an awful lot of trouble getting any of the questions the sheriff asked. Sheriff got tired of yelling and wrote 'em down on paper. Smart. See what I mean?"

"Not exactly," I said. "Hadn't his wife run away?"

"He'd murdered her. And the hired man. Or rather, he was *murdering* them. Must have taken a couple of weeks, about. Found 'em a month later."

He glowered, his face black with anger.

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"In the smokehouse," he said. "A new smokehouse made out of concrete and not used yet. With a padlock on the outside of the door. He'd walked through the farmyard one day about a month before — that's what he said after their bodies were found — and noticed the padlock wasn't locked, just hanging in the hook and not even through the hasp. See? Just to keep the padlock from being lost or swiped, he slips it through the hasp and snaps it."

"My God," I said. "And they were in there? They starved to death?"

"Thirst kills you quicker. Oh, they'd tried hard to get out, all right. Scraped halfway through the door with a piece of concrete he'd worked loose. It was a thick door. I figure they yelled, after a while. I figure they hammered on that door plenty. Was there sound, mister, with only a *deaf* man living near the door?"

Again he chuckled humorlessly. He said: "Your train'll be along soon. That was the whistle you heard. It stops up by the water tower. It'll be here in ten minutes." And without changing his tone of voice, except that it got louder again, he said: "It was a bad way to die. Even if he was right in killing them, only a black-hearted son of a gun would have done it that way. Don't you think so?"

I said: "But are you sure he is —"

"Deaf? Sure, he's deaf. Can't you picture him standing there in front of that padlocked door, listening with his deaf ears to the hammering inside? And the yelling? Sure, he's deaf. That's why I can say all this to him, yell it in his ear. If I'm wrong, he can't hear me. But he can hear me. He comes here to hear me."

I had to ask it. "Why? Why would he — if you're right."

"I'm helping him, that's why. I'm helping him to make up his black mind to hang a rope from the grating in the top of that smokehouse, and dangle from it. He hasn't got the guts to, yet. So every time he's in town, he sits on the platform a while to rest. And I tell him what a murdering son of a gun he is."

The scrape of feet behind me made me turn. The tall man with the huge hands and the granite face was standing up now. He didn't look toward us.

The agent said: "He'll hang himself, pretty soon now. He wouldn't come here and sit like that for any other reason, would he, mister?"

"Unless," I said, "he *is* deaf."

"Sure. He could be. See what I meant? If a tree falls and the only man there to hear it is maybe deaf and maybe not, is it silent or isn't it?"

I turned and looked at the tall figure walking away from the station. He walked slowly and his shoulders, big as they were, seemed a little stooped.

The clock in the steeple a block away began to strike 8 o'clock.

The tall man lifted his wrist to look at the watch on it.

I shuddered a little. It could have been coincidence, sure, and yet a little chill went down my spine.

The train pulled in, and I got aboard.

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How should we describe Giglamps? Well, he's a sort of a bloomin' composite, so to speak — a kind of a manhuntin' montage, if you know what we mean. In some of his adventures he's a hobo-Robin Hood; in others he's a tramp-detective — a rare variety of the sleuthian species, believe it or not; and in still other escapades he's not too far from the edge of the law — to say nothing of being a combination fairy prince, philosopher, and guardian angel to boot.

It would help perhaps if we presented you with a physical description, as given by the author in the very first story about Giglamps. "Balanced on his nose were a pair of pince-nez. The man was something between a somebody of the nobodies and a nobody of the somebodies, and the gulf was bridged by the eyglasses. But, conceivable that he had seen better days, it was inconceivable that he had seen them through his eyeglasses. Stolen thread secured their frame, unclean stamp-edging [today it would be scotch tape] gripped frantically one lens, and a cable of grocer's string held the lot to a moth-hole in a wrecked lapel. Eyeglasses. But only just. Nothing to boast of. And yet not all the farce of them, nor all the ivy of indolence, could destroy the last crumbling hint of architecture that clung to the ruin because of them. The gentlemen of the highway, the other Sons of Dust, called him Giglamps. And other things. But very nearly they might have called him sir."

Thus the vagrant-criminologist, the vagabond-criminal . . . and now we bring you one of his most charming exploits. It is a tale shot through with perceptive imagery, and even more, it is a subtle study in morals, a penetrating exposé of the different strata of British society . . .

A WISH FOR A CIGAR

by WILL SCOTT

"GIVE ME," SAID GIGLAMPS, "A FLOR *de somethin'* an' I'll be happy. Otherwise, a cigar. Now, ain't that a rummy thing to wish for?" And he stirred round on the bench for warmth as the east wind descended from argument to abuse.

"Speaking for myself, which I am very well qualified to do, I say money," drawled Mercury Smith. "It's money makes the world go round."

"It certainly don't make it go very square," said Giglamps. "That's why I never loved oof enough to want to marry it, like some johnnies do. Yer can't trust it. Yer never know what

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it'll be up to. A quid can keep on rakin' up trouble until it's worn out. Now a cigar's different: it gets it over an' done with. £ s.d. is the wrong sex. A cigar's a man. It knows when to stop. But money is no lady."

Ten o'clock chimed.

"There's nothing I'd not do for the johnny who'd pass me a *flor de somethin'* at this moment," the tramp went on. "I'd fergive him anything he ever done, whatever it was. I reckon it'd wipe it out. . . ."

And thus, as a molehill's first step to mountainhood, opened again the first chapter of that threadbare story of the Return from the Wilderness to the Fold. Penniless and shelterless on the seats of St. Giles's, Giglamps wished for a *flor de somethin'*. A cigar. He might have wished for a roof above, a bankbook, or a bed. He wished for a smoke, and out of his wish came the tiny train of events that puffed to its terminus in the halls of the mighty, depositing Martin Bradbury to wear dress clothes again and make the wine to flow and fear not any man. The cats of old St. Giles's see the end of many things under the gray walls of the forgotten church, but they look not for beginnings there. It is not the place. They sit, as it were, upon the rocks at the finish of things, placidly watching the wrecks drive home. Never before had they witnessed a launching.

Just a cigar, then. "A rummy thing to wish for, eh?"

The man of fourteen — Mercury Smith — and the boy of 40 — Giglamps — relapsed into silence, and it was first in this silence that they heard the shuffle of weary feet from the next bench and saw that an outcast had risen and was coming towards them.

The outcast was a man nearing middle age who trod the concrete as if it were carpeted with silken mud. A plump man, with a calm and sophisticated stare and gentle white hands that always had left it to other hands to do. Though the night and the street lamps were tactful about his shabbiness, they could not dim the manner behind the rags. He who sat on the bench adjusting his battered glasses might with a little effort have lived his days very far from the gutters that he adorned; but it needed no second glance through those glasses to show that the stranger, with even less effort, might never have been there at all. His bearing would not have disgraced Pall Mall and his accents were accents that the gutters often hear but echo seldom.

"Have one of mine," he said; adding, at the tramp's astonished gasp — "A cigar, you know." And he flourished two for the other's choice.

"Lumme!" Giglamps exclaimed. "There must be fairies about! I was just wishin' ——"

"Aloud," said the stranger. "Yes, I heard you. You don't mind if I sit here? There's nobody to talk to in this confounded hole."

A match scraped, and the stranger was instructed in the way of hiding the glare from police eyes in the street

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behind the screen of a tattered coat. He thanked Giglamps for the tip and then both men began to puff, while Mercury Smith sat silent on the end of the bench, but with eyes and ears very busy. Giglamps made praise of the *flor de somethin'* in a speech that was as near to a lyric as it was far from a lexicon. The stranger laughed.

"They used to say I had a gift for choosing cigars. Sir Cholmondeley Marr called it genius. Everybody left it to me."

Without seeming unwilling, he volunteered no further information, and Giglamps had to cast about for another and tactful opening. Obviously this stranger belonged to a class on whom the direct question would be lost.

"More like the Ritz than St. Giles's, this," he said at length, sniffing the cigar.

"I'm afraid those days are over," said the stranger, with a shake of the head. "I haven't got the money."

"You've got the cigars, anyway."

Again the stranger laughed, not so much as if he had seen the joke, but rather as if there were no joke to see. He stared a moment at his cigar, as if possibly the thing might be persuaded to tell its own tale. Then he said:

"Yes, I've got the cigar, but not the money. You see — the cigar box was open . . . the till wasn't."

"H'm!" said Giglamps; and they smoked on a little while without speaking. Then the stranger brought back his gaze from something afar and turned to the tramp again.

"Once it was the till that was open and not the cigar box," he said. "There was no arrest, because of the scandal, but — well, here I am."

"Cheating at cards kind o' thing?"

"Something like that. Without the cards. Strange business, life, don't you think?"

"When yer get caught," said Giglamps reflectively.

The stranger spread himself out.

"I say, do you mind moving up a little? There's no room for my legs. These confounded benches are so hard. I suppose you're used to it."

In the shuffle a small voice drawled from the end of the bench: "They don't all get caught"; and the two men turned to stare at Mercury Smith.

"I've got an uncle who sells corn-cure that makes corns grow," said Smith. "He just laughs at it. And then there are the books my father writes. Pa admits it is sheer robbery to take the money, but they'll be giving him a knighthood for them some day. The chief thing is to not get caught. You've got to be clever."

The stranger stared first at Mercury and then at the tramp by his side. "Is he with you?" he asked blankly.

"Not half he ain't!" Giglamps sighed. "All the time! I dunno what to do. Poisonin' ain't legal. I'm pretty much like you, yer see. I been at the till when it was open, an' he caught me at it. If I tries to hop away he sits down an' yells for the police. It's turnin' me gray. He uses me as a kind

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o' terrier. I fetch scraps for him when he's hungry an' find him places to sleep. It ain't no use tryin' to hop. He's like a sixpence in a Scotch pocket."

"Yes, but ——"

"He's run away from home, yer see. It ain't no use takin' him back, neither. His ol' man will have barricaded hisself in by now. I dunno what to do."

"One is so fettered at home," Smith offered. "It is all very well for some temperaments, but I am a man of the open spaces."

"In somebody else's check book," Giglamps muttered.

"Home is narrowing, cramping," Smith added. "It gives one no scope."

"Scope for what?" the stranger asked.

"Well," said Smith, after due consideration, "I think I shall be a crook. It should be great fun. It is great fun in the stories. And then there's Uncle Edwin. Everybody admires him. And I'm cleverer than Uncle Edwin."

Beautifully he breathed upon his nails and rubbed them on his elegant trousers. The stranger glanced at the tramp; the tramp at the stranger. Then Giglamps said:

"There's only one thing for it if I'm to get rid of him. Borstal!"

"I fail to see it," Mercury drawled. "I should plead outside influence and people would pity me. I should blame you and father and the moving pictures. My age would do it. All crooks ought to be fourteen. It's a great help."

"For heaven's sake, don't wind him up," Giglamps said to the stranger. "He goes for eight days. It's a good thing he ain't a woman, eh? The world'd bust."

The men sat silent, letting the springs of Smith run themselves down; and it was not until the first gentle drops upon the pavement had ended their overture and the curtain was up on the first scene of a melodrama of weather that the stranger remembered what he had come for and returned to the point.

"You said you'd do anything for the man that gave you a cigar."

"Sure."

"Find me a shelter, then. You'll know the ropes — I don't. Last night I slept in Covent Garden." The stranger shuddered and rubbed his hands together. "That's not the sort of thing that must happen twice."

"Right-o, your nibs," said Giglamps, pulling his coat about his collarless neck. After which he rose and stood glaring at Mercury Smith. "*Re* you," he sighed, "what about it?"

"Oh, I shall come," said Smith, flicking the dust of St. Giles's from his Savile Row jacket.

"Rather!" Giglamps snapped, leading the way to the railings. "I got you for keeps, I have! You're the inscription on my tombstone."

They climbed over and were well upon their way before the melodrama of rain had got properly going.

There used to stand, and may stand now, in one of those strange and

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echoey streets untrod by man to the north of Primrose Hill, a cabmen's shelter that never knew a cabhorse nor sheltered a cabman, serving no apparent purpose whatever, of beauty or utility. Seasons and calendars were a cheerless farce in this forgotten corner. Time had lost hope there. The street would be called a respectable street, but it was a street respectable with the respectability of a marble tomb; a street that had spiritually passed away; an anticlimax of a street. It seemed impossible that letters could be left there, or newspapers; that milkmen should call in the mornings, or that men should come home to the place on Saturday afternoons. It dipped a little from Primrose Hill and then gently rose, and the impossible cabmen's shelter was in the hollow, where it was hardest for the wind to blow and easiest for the rubbish to come to rest.

To this lost spot it was that Giglamps eventually piloted his companions, ushering them inside after a slick dealing with the door that told of old familiarity. The shelter was doubly welcome, for the melodrama was by now in excellent form. At other places they had been too late.

"Nobody knows," he said, closing the door. "So long's you keep quiet an' don't shine a light, it's all right. I mostly only come when the weather's bad, 'cos it's a bit out o' central, but it's safe. An' it's a bit of a storehouse, too," he added, moving aside a box in the corner. "We all pass on the word an' the boys do what they can. Aha!"

He took out a parcel and opened it on the little table. Then he drew hard at the remaining stub of cigar, displaying the find in the dull glow.

"Enclosed please find bread an' cheese. Not what *you* been used to, p'r'aps, but as fresh as the air an' a darn sight more sustainin'. Your highness — kindly accept sample."

They sat round the table and ate, "his highness" at such an incredible speed that he finished with three minutes to spare.

"I say," he said suddenly, rubbing his hands together, "I haven't had a meal for two days, you know."

"I ain't had a meal for two months, your highness," said Giglamps. "Not what yer could call a meal. What about it?"

"Well, you know what you said. There was nothing you'd not do for the man who gave you a cigar. I gave you a cigar. I'd nothing else to give. Perhaps you're used to going without. I'm not. It's different for me."

Giglamps sat up and stared calmly at the stranger, balancing his last slice in his left hand. Then with the other he suddenly fumbled for a knife.

"I see," he said. "Well, your grace, I dunno. You may have been educated at Harrow, but they didn't teach you it all, even there. You got a few things to learn. Still, you give me that cigar when you'd nothing else to give, an' you ain't used to roughin' it, as yer say. Here's the doin's."

He laid half the slice aside and passed the other to "his highness," who proceeded to devour it as if it

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were the first slice in the world. Not until the last crumb was consumed did the apology come.

"You see," he said, "when one has always been used to the best it comes very hard. Hang it! I can't *steal* food. And I can't go about the streets *begging*. I did what I could. I gave you the cigar."

He stood up and brushed away the crumbs with a gesture that was like the sound from a dropped stone at the bottom of a deep and mossy well. Then he walked round the shelter and found a cabman's ancient blanket that blended well with the gesture. It was the only covering in the place, and he took it calmly and wrapped it round him and settled down in the corner.

"You don't mind, do you?" he asked. "You see, you're used to it, but I should probably die of cold. I did what I could. I am only sorry that I could not do more."

"That's all right, viscount," said Giglamps, after a pause. "You need it more than I do. You was born with a silver spoon in your mouth. I was only born with a cigar in mine."

The comparative comfort, together with the comparative supper, loosened the derelict's tongue, and he polished afresh and made to glow that pearl of boastfulness which is always the only gem remaining from the vanished crown of "once was." He clutched at the thin beam of limelight with a greed akin to his acceptance of another's food, and led his hearers in fancy through those inner shrines that neither might ever see in fact. They lazed with him at Goodwood, dined with him at a Guildhall feast, and penetrated to the right side of the windows of Berkeley Square. He had no interruption. Though his narrative lacked art it was heavy in interest and truth. Though both Giglamps and Mercury Smith might have turned from a Stevensonian style, they listened to "his highness" as eagerly as they would have read a newspaper.

"And here I am sleeping in a cabmen's shelter!" he finished with a weary sneer. "And last night it was Covent Garden! Heaven! Charlie Fairlight — Lord Charles Fairlight, you know — used to vow that I'd finish low. A remarkable thing. 'Bradbury,' he'd say, 'mark my words — you'll come to a bad end.' It used to be his favorite joke. I guess Charlie Fairlight has thought of his favorite joke a few times since then!"

"There ain't no chance at all, then, of you gettin' taken back into the happy family?" Giglamps asked.

"You don't seem to understand," replied the other. "One can do almost anything but tamper with money."

He turned over and loosened the blanket about his neck. "It's infernally hot in here," he said. "Would you mind opening a window and letting in a little fresh air? There's no ventilation."

"There's no more blankets, either," said Giglamps. "When you pinched the Equator you left us the Arctic Circle."

"But it's most unhealthy!" Brad-

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bury protested. "I've not been used ——"

Giglamps rose and crossed the room. "Oh, *all* right!" he said. "Have your window open. I wouldn't like you to die on my hands. Much as I wouldn't mind buryin' you!"

He thrust heavily on the window frame, but the years are a wonderful glazier and the window would not move. He turned to the dark corner where Mercury Smith had made his bed, to ask the boy's aid. But a wail from the blanket dragged his attention to other things.

"I say — there's a most infernal draught! The door isn't properly closed. Do you mind ——"

Giglamps swung round and stood over the dilapidated Bradbury, hands on hips and chin thrust forward. For a long moment he said nothing; then he commenced.

"Look here, my lad, your lordship," he snapped, "you may be the gilt on the little tin soldiers, but you ain't all the army, remember. Cut down the orders a bit. I'll close the door for you. If yer like, I'll tuck yer in an' warm your milk. But it ain't because I love yer, Sir Roger, not by a long chalk it ain't. It's because you're what yer are, that's all. I never been quite so near to a belted Belgravian before, but I seen a few in the distance an' I heard a lot about 'em, an' I'm real sorry for yer. Straight, I am. Yer don't mind starvin' so long's you've plenty to eat, or bein' broke so long's you've plenty o' cash or roughin' it so long's it's made smooth for yer; but I'm really sorry for yer, all the same. You dunno what it is. When it comes to livin' with the lid off, you're kids — helpless infants, that's what you are. An' I could no more bounce yer than I could pinch a kid's bottle. The very sight of yer worries my eyes, but I couldn't do it. If you was a commercial, or a bus driver, or anythin' else pretty low down where the fun is, an' you tried one of your little parlor games on me then, I'd write 'Not known' across yer an' send yer back. But just because you're belted an' bloated an' ain't never been nearer to the Derby than the five-quid enclosure, I got to let yer down easy. You're a two-year-old. You're a responsibility. I got to be gentle with yer. But it ain't 'cos I love yer, mind. An' it ain't 'cos I'm forced to do it, see? I'm doin' it 'cos I'm a bit silly, not 'cos you've signed me on, you know. You seem to have got the idea that when I took your cigar I took your shillin'. Get rid of it, quick!"

He walked to the door and stood staring at it. Then he turned and poked in a corner with his foot, meeting no resistance.

"Who *opened* the door?" he asked. "An' where's my knife? Smithlet!"

No answer. He groaned.

"What is the matter?" said Bradbury.

"Matter?" said Giglamps. "Oh, nothin'. Only the fiendlet's loose in the open spaces with my knife, an' only the angels know what he'll bring back with him when he comes. Sure to be trouble, anyway."

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"You can wake me if anything happens," said Bradbury.

"Sure," said Giglamps. "Will yer want a cup o' tea an' hot water, too?"

When in half an hour Mercury Smith returned, Giglamps got him at the first grab and dragged him, struggling, to the floor. There was a little clang in the midst of the struggle and Giglamps put his hand on a key. This he slipped into his pocket as the boy broke loose and hurried across the room.

"What's the merry idea?" he asked.

"Give me that key!" Mercury demanded. "I want it for another time."

"But what you been doin'?"

Receiving no answer, Giglamps made another dash, and Mercury, in an endeavor to slip past, tripped in the dark and fell. There was the rolling tinkle of many coins coming to rest in dark corners. Giglamps gasped as he dragged the boy to his feet and held him against the wall. "Baron," he said to Bradbury, "we've got to risk a match. Do you mind collectin' the doin's while I hold the kid?"

"I'll scream!" said Smith. "Then they'll think it's you!"

"Oh, no, they'll not," said Giglamps. "It's your little footprints that have been made this puddly night. You keep quiet while we gather up the doin's or I'll do the screamin'. All right, duke, you keep an eye on the thieflet while I sweep up the dust."

"That's better," said Bradbury. "If you left it to me I might be tempted not to count it properly."

"Eminence," said Giglamps, pausing with a match on the striker, "that little remark raises you so much higher in my estimation that you almost sinks to the level of a commercial or a bus driver. If yer keep on like that I shall end by admirin' you. It ain't that I objects to a little necessary liftin'," he continued as he struck the match and stooped, "but there's some pockets what ain't proper game, even when they're full. There's a time an' place for all things. The owner o' this doin's ain't done us no harm, an' so there's no excuse for gettin' him in the ring. But the chief thing is the crooklet here. He's young enough to be another responsibility, and —"

He broke off and began to mutter in surprised tones as he collected the spoils in a little heap on the table and struck another match to examine it closely.

"*Isn't* it money?" Bradbury asked, seeing his face in the light.

"It's money all right — yes. Only it ain't none of it been circulated since B.C., an' such times, if yer ask me. Come out of old Somebody's tomb at Luxor, I sh'd think. I ain't never seen anythin' like 'em before — 'cept under plates in tea shops!" And as the light died out Giglamps stood up and faced Mercury Smith. "Talk!" he said.

"Surely," said Mercury, "you didn't think I was so crude as to steal money, did you? Real money?"

"Why ——"

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"I broke into a house for some tuck. I'm small enough to get half-through the back window and take the key. Then it is easy. After I'd got the tuck I just had a look round for the fun of the thing, and that is when I found these. I know something about old coins. You should see my Uncle Edwin's collection."

"When is pinchin' not pinchin'?" Giglamps asked.

"Ah! there you are wrong," smiled Smith. "I merely borrowed these without the owner's permission. Uncle Edwin will give me £50 for these and no questions asked. He won't care where they came from, so long as he can have them. These old men with hobbies have the slackest notions of honesty. He will give me £50 for these and never say a word. The idea came to me the moment I saw them."

"Borrowed?" said Giglamps.

"Borrowed, brother. That is why I must keep the key. I shall borrow them back from Uncle Edwin when he isn't looking and return them to their owner. Uncle Edwin badly needs the lesson, and I badly need the £50."

"Smithlet," said Giglamps very slowly, as if there were sustenance in the very words, "if I was your father I should just now be doin' the fourteenth year of a 'lifer' because of you, cheerfully an' without a grumble. That is, if they hadn't give me a free pardon. I think they would have." He felt for the key and found it safe in his pocket. He tucked the coins away in his handkerchief. He put on his hat. "Lead the way, Smithlet," he said. "I don't say that Whatsisname don't deserve to lose 'em, but he don't deserve it from us. I never kick the horse that ain't bit me. An' he ain't bit you neither. An' your uncle's got enough on his mind bein' your uncle, without havin' to pay for it. Come on."

"Touch me and I'll scream!" cried Mercury Smith.

"Scream on, son. They're your little fairy footprints in the house there, not mine. Now are yer comin'?"

"Are you going to give me up?"

"No, Smithlet. 'Cos I couldn't find anyone who'd have yer. An' it wouldn't be fair to any prison if I was to tell the cops. I got to think of the poor depraved an' debased convicts inside, an' the effect yer'd have on 'em. I only want yer to show me the house where you found these doin's. What happens then is my business. See? Just trot along an' point out the house to me, then your time's your own. Now. With reference to hurryin'?"

"Oh, all right," said Mercury Smith.

Mercury Smith left Giglamps ringing the bell of a large gray house that fronted on Primrose Hill. When the servant opened the door the boy was back in the shelter.

"What do you want?" the servant asked.

"In reply to yours," said Giglamps, "I want the lord high panjandrum of this said palace. Tell him the fairy

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prince has come. Tell him it's more urgent than it looks."

"But what do —" the servant began again.

Giglamps forced his way into the hall and closed the door behind him. "Plain English seems a bit too fancy for you," he said. "I'm in, an' if yer want me thrown out fetch the boss. P.S. — Hurry!"

The servant strode away in a state of high indignation, leaving the "fairy prince" to warm himself by walking up and down the hall. Cold as the night was, the grate was empty, and Giglamps observed with some interest that the carpet was threadbare in many places. Yet the things in cases and the pictures on the wall were such as could come only to a man of large fortune.

The place was at once penny plain and tuppence colored. Signs of boundless wealth were side by side with tokens of stinting poverty. Original Turners shared the walls with cheaply-framed Press photographs. Wondering deeply at the puzzle, Giglamps stood before the latter in mild interest, which of a sudden quickened to an interest vast and strong. A little label beneath one of the photographs announced that it portrayed Lord Charles Fairlight being chaired by the Something Club at its Revel in 1914 at the residence of Sir Cholmondeley Marr; and to the right of the little group, immaculate in evening attire, was none other than "his highness" Bradbury, who slept now, an outcast, in the cabmen's shelter. A third man was shaking Lord Charles by the hand, and it was an aging reflection of this third man that stepped from the staircase as Giglamps turned, and came across the hall with raised brows towards his ragged visitor.

Giglamps had less than a minute in which to think. He thought many things, tumbling thoughts that got in each other's way, but out of them came something clear. He did not need all of the minute.

"Well," said the old man sharply, "what do you want?"

Giglamps noted the shabbiness of his attire and the brilliance of the diamonds in his rings.

"I don't want anythin'," he replied. "It's others what's doin' the wantin' — includin' yerself. Listen, admiral. I came here to do you a good turn just now — a very good turn indeed, as you'll agree when you hear all about it. But somethin' else has cropped up while I been waitin'. We'll attend to that first." He pointed to the photograph on the wall. "This feller here in this picture — Bradbury, they call him. You knew him?"

The old man dazedly rubbed his hands together as he replied:

"Ah, yes — Bradbury. A very sad affair. An excellent reputation shattered in a night. A very good man before that — very good. But I don't see how this concerns me?"

"It does," said Giglamps. "Listen to me. Bradbury's down an' out an' goin' to pieces. You knew him when he was what he isn't now, an' I want yer to help him up again."

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"But —" The old man stopped rather irritably, then snapped his fingers and proceeded: "This is Lord Charles's affair, surely? It was his money ——"

"Mebbe," Giglamps interrupted, "but I don't know him. I only know you. I said I come here to do you a good turn, didn't I? So I did. I can save you a lot o' trouble an' anxiety an' mebbe a lot o' money too. *If I want to.* It's up to you to make me want. That's all."

"Trouble and anxiety — and money? I don't quite understand ——"

"I know. That's why I'm able to put the screw on yer."

The old man began to pace slowly up and down the hall, his attention apparently concentrated on the threadbare carpet, gently rubbing one hand across the other. When at length he stopped it was to say:

"What is there I can do?"

"I want you to help him back where he belongs," said Giglamps. "That's all. If you ain't willin' to try I walk right out of here an' I vanish. An' yer'll be sorry fer that, believe me."

"This is most extraordinary!" said the old man. "I quite fail to see ——"

He broke off and took a seat beside the empty grate, leaving his visitor to stand. For five minutes by a cheap clock in the corner he argued and sought more information. And for five minutes Giglamps put up a brilliant defense, saying plenty but telling nothing. At last the old man rose and came to a decision.

That he was a collector of many things was very plain, but for the look which came suddenly into his aged eyes as he rose from the chair Giglamps, strangely enough, was not prepared at all. It was the still gleam of — the collector. And Giglamps could not understand.

"Bradbury — where is he?" the old man asked.

"Not far away."

"Can you bring him here?"

"In five minutes."

"Very well."

It was a stunned and bewildered outcast that Giglamps led into the hall at the end of the five minutes. For a moment Bradbury drew himself up when he found himself once more in an appropriate setting; but his eyes fell when they met the eyes of the old man and he half-turned away.

"Bradbury," the old man began, a note of sternness creeping into his voice, "there is no need for me to waste words, I am sure. At the risk of Lord Charles's displeasure I am willing to take you in here. But you understand what is against you. I think I am generous in offering you fifteen shillings a week. You understand, of course, that if you are not prepared to take it you must be prepared to leave it."

"Yes — *sir.* I understand, sir. It is quite satisfactory, sir."

"Then go below and report in the morning."

As Bradbury crept away the old man turned to Giglamps.

"There never was a butler like Bradbury, you know."

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"*Butler?*" Giglamps gasped.

"Yes. Lord Charles, in spite of everything, was sorry to lose him. But — however — h'm! Yes. We made a bargain, I believe? Er — what ——"

Like a falling rocket coming to earth, Giglamps turned his attention to the old man and his business.

"Yes," he said. "Oh, yes. Yes. Besides gettin' you the finest butler on Gawd's earth at end-of-the-season rates — *this!*"

He drew forth the knotted handkerchief and showered the coins on the table.

"What!" cried the old man.

"They was pinched from your house tonight, an' I happened to catch the burglar at it, that's all."

The tramp was making his way to the door when suddenly the old man put up his hand.

"Wait! All this — all this — it is most bewildering — all this happening at once. I'm not quite clear. I must — er — I must see that you do not go unrewarded. If you'll wait —"

Leaving Giglamps in the hall, the old man passed from sight through a door on the left.

The door of the forgotten shelter was gently pushed open and Giglamps came in. Gently he closed the door behind him and gently he sat upon the long seat by the wall.

"Smithlet!" he called to the darkness.

"Yes?" said a voice from the corner.

"Oh, you're there, are you? Might have known I couldn't get rid of yer so easy," he mumbled to himself.

"Next time I wish for a cigar I don't put it in writing," he said. "When yer gets yer wish, yer've got to play fairy prince till your magic wand gets bent. No. All 'cos I wished fer a cigar. . . . The trouble I've had! The things I've done fer you an' his highness an' your Uncle Edwin an' ol' Whatsisname up the street! I might say that my arrival has been witnessed."

"Why this sadness?" said Smith.

Giglamps was fumbling in his pocket. He dragged something forth and peered at it in the dim light.

"The key!" he said. "The key of ol' Whatsisname's house, what you pinched. I fergot ter give him it back." He held it out. "Take it, Smithlet," he said. "Take it, an' do what yer like with it. I promise ter look the other way."

"I see," said Smith, languidly smiling. "I understand. You got nothing for your trouble."

"Wrong again, Smithlet. The fairy didn't come away without somethin' off the Christmas tree — oh no! Old Whatsisname made quite a speech about it, too, fer a old 'un. 'Token of his esteem,' kind o' thing. Oh yes, he rewarded me."

He struck a match and sent a trembling illumination into the darkest corner.

"What are you doing?" asked Mercury Smith.

"Doin'?" said Giglamps. "Lightin' the cigar that old Whatsisname give me!"

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With each succeeding year more and more famous literary figures are contributing detective-crime short stories to EQMM's annual contests. In past years prizes have been won by such internationally celebrated writers as William Faulkner, T. S. Stribling, Wilbur Daniel Steele, Ben Hecht, Oliver La Farge, C. S. Forester, Lord Dunsany, and Mark Van Doren; and last year, in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest, four noted "serious" authors won awards — Phyllis Bentley, William March, L. A. G. Strong, and Frank Swinnerton.

Now we bring you Frank Swinnerton's newest short story, "Ms. in a Safe." Like all his work, Mr. Swinnerton's prize-winning story is essentially a character study, told with what has been called "romantic realism." And if the unfolding of the story is leisurely, it is leisurely in the great British tradition — and with no sacrifice of leashed power and dramatic impact. As John K. Hutchens wrote, in his New York Herald Tribune review of Frank Swinnerton's latest novel, AN AFFAIR OF LOVE, *Mr. Swinnerton has never written a story "in which you did not feel that he knew exactly what he wanted to do and how he wanted to do it."*

Nearly all critics agree that Frank Swinnerton's finest book is NOCTURNE. *Wilson Midgley, editor of John O' London's Weekly, has told the anecdote of* NOCTURNE*'s birth: "What first started Frank Swinnerton on the path of fame was that impossible thing, a masterpiece written to specification. As the result of a talk in which it was declared that nobody had ever written a novel about the events of one night, Swinnerton sat down to do it. His mother was very ill in bed and he was her nurse. Night after night as he wrote it [in 1917] he read the new part to the old lady, who unfailingly fell asleep. At the end of six weeks he had finished* NOCTURNE *. . . which carried English and American circles by storm," — and received the highest praise from writers all over the world.*

MS. IN A SAFE

by FRANK SWINNERTON

I SAY NOTHING IN DEFENSE OF Maisie. As you must have recognized in reading Roddie Tracker's extraordinary book, *Rueful Grimace*, she was the worst of bad hats. Roddie didn't spare her. The whole book was written as an act of vengeance, which leaves one with a poor notion of Rod-

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die's character; but the portrait is true. Nevertheless, the girl is dead. Otherwise *Rueful Grimace* could not have been published.

Well, it was a fateful book; and if it had never been written — no, I mustn't begin the story like that. It would be truer to say, "If human nature had been different" or "If she and Roddie had both been different." Alternatively, "If that quiet, generous, crazy fool Sam Featherfew hadn't been at his wits' ends." Crazy! Sam was always my hero. You felt he'd been through some sort of hell and become a stoic. He never said anything about it, even to Calloway or myself.

Get these four people clearly in your mind. Maisie Slant — or Crook — or Twist — the intoxicating singer and dancer, brilliantly blonde, quick, and treacherous — she's dead. Roddie Tracker, dramatist and story-writer, half a genius and half the sort of creature who used to fling vitriol in the face of anybody who bested him, madly in love with her, betrayed, sent packing, lured back, and finally, knowing that he was doomed, determined to revenge himself by printing the whole story — he's dead. Sam Featherfew the publisher, quiet, decent, kindly, as lean as a lamp-post, squinting behind his hornrims as he rubbed the tip of his nose with the tip of his forefinger, and looking like a secretary bird — he's dead, too. The fourth, still alive, is the secret-sharer — Tom Calloway. Detective-Inspector Calloway of Scotland Yard.

Probably you didn't realize that I knew Calloway. He's one of those penetrating devils who by the grace of genius can make themselves practically invisible. Nobody guesses that he's a policeman. Half the time they don't know he's there at all. When we dine quietly at the Club, nobody says, "Who's your distinguished friend?" All suppose him to be a new member, or some chap I knew at school, or a humdrum relation from the Provinces. This inconspicuousness is a great asset to Inspector Calloway.

He can sit in a railway carriage opposite the man he's chasing, and the man will never suspect him. However often they may run across each other in a single day, no thought will cross that man's mind that they have met before. I have seen them look puzzled from the dock; and to tell you the truth, although I know Calloway as well as anybody, I myself have sat in a compartment without spotting him. On one such occasion he complimented me on my tact. As the police reports say, I "made no answer."

Well, now, you're familiar with the main facts. Maisie was Roddie Tracker's mistress, off and on, for a couple of years. She threw him over; and after she'd done so London was full of discreditable rumors about him. Oh, he drank, drugged, was a brute, was given to all manner of nasty habits, and so on. He tried hard to pin the rumors on Maisie, but he never succeeded. For one thing, he could never find out just what they were. For another, she had friends of her own

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sex, who murmured, shrugged, looked injured on her account, and let it be gathered that they were too loyal to dear old Maisie to talk. They were loyal, all right. They did her work. All that Tracker could discover was that people treated him queerly, and, when cornered and challenged, they cried, "My dear chap, why come to *me*? It's no business of mine" — and cold-shouldered him.

This made Roddie furious. To a man of his temperament, always on edge, biting his nails, letting fly with his tongue, and quarreling with other men like a tomcat, it was torture. He used to wait outside Maisie's flat at night, watching for her lovers. He caught cold, and the cold settled in his lungs. When he was driven to see a specialist he was sent to another man, and discovered that he was dying.

A germ — he never knew how he had picked it up or how long it had been at work — was wasting his muscles and killing him fast. Naturally, he tried to poohpooh the specialist. He fancied the trouble was due to Maisie's malignant cruelty and the torment of this whispering scandal. In the end he understood. His strength began to go. He was put to bed. He scrawled a pencil note to her, begging for kindness in his last weeks. She ignored it. Probably, knowing Roddie, she thought he was shamming.

Meanwhile he'd run through his money. He'd always been a spendthrift, and the specialists' fees were high. The private hospital's fees were high. The expenses of his luxury flat were still running. And of course he was in no state to produce work for those anxious times. The war had begun; the country was still off its balance; and Roddie was soon overdrawn at the bank, with no friends to help him. I was serving abroad, others were scattered far and wide, and those who stayed at home were busy and unsympathetic. The only person at hand was Sam Featherfew, and Sam paid and paid until even Roddie saw that it couldn't go on. In the end Sam did, as it seemed to me, the only thing possible. He agreed to take *Rueful Grimace* in full settlement.

Rueful Grimace was written in the hospital. Written at hot speed, in pencil — the feverish autobiography of a man who knew he was dying and who had reached the point of blaming Maisie for all his troubles — including death. That comes out in the book. He finished it about a week before it became impossible for him to hold and steer a pencil. The manuscript went into Sam's safe. Only he and Roddie knew anything about it.

I came home on leave just in time for Roddie's cremation, which Sam and I saw to. It was very quiet. Sam and I were the only people present who had really known Roddie. The others were inquisitive spectators — ghouls, if you like. Maisie didn't show up at all. She was said to be too upset; but the truth was that she played most spiritedly that night in a club called Domino Spots, as if a load was off her mind; and I was told she was particularly busy just then

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with a fighter pilot killed soon after in the Blitz.

Domino Spots had lately reached what they called its "Second Edition," and Maisie's great hit in it was a song in which, dressed in white, with her hair down, she pretended to be a seventeen year old ingenue:

I'm a one-boy girl.
You can't tempt me.
Not a kiss, not a glance,
Not a word, not a chance!
When I love it's forever.
He's so good, he's so clever,
Nothing ever could us sever,
Break our romance
Or joy enhance,
Because I'm a one-boy girl!

I could not help smiling at this; and yet I must admit that she played her part with all the skill that simplicity demands. The gallery squealed with rapture; youngsters on leave were captivated. Sam, who was with me, sat with his skinny old face looking like a Red Indian's for almost the whole evening; but at this song even he, I noticed, could not keep his lips steady. I therefore didn't say what was in my mind to say.

It was on my next leave that I found Sam, as it seemed to me, a little pensive; and when I went unexpectedly to his office I thought the elderly woman at the Inquiries desk looked up as the door opened, as if something less pleasing than a friend might be coming in. She knew, of course, more than I did about Sam's doings; and I suspect from what I now know that she was wondering whether, one Friday evening, there would be no pay envelope for her. It was only an impression I had. Sam was as calm as ever — an oyster.

When one's leave is short one hasn't time to make elaborate inquiries; but I asked Jones-Thompson, who's in the book trade, if things were booming. He said: "Booming. For once booksellers aren't grumbling. They're hungry for new books; and the books are like orphans, running across the shops to meet customers!"

"Everybody happy, then?" I asked.

"Happy!" he jeered. "Got no paper. Got no cash. If we could get the books, we could sell 'em."

"How about Sam?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"He's got some paper," was what he said, and left me abruptly.

I went back to the War, pondering. Then I wrote to Sam, saying: "It so happens that I've got £500 I can't — being away—profitably employ. Would it be any good to you? No strings." He telegraphed back: "A godsend." So I arranged for the bank to let him have it. Oh, I got the money back all right; Sam was always a good payer. But you see that my impression had been justified.

As far as I could tell, nobody mourned Roddie much. He'd had his day; nothing he ever wrote is likely to last or be revived; and we were all busy getting on with the toughest war the world had ever known. So what with one thing and another Sam and

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his affairs passed from our minds until suddenly, inexplicably, Maisie was found dead in her flat.

She had given a show the evening before in Domino Spots, scoring the usual triumph with *A One-Boy Girl*. She must have come home as she did every night in the Blackout. And she was found, half-dressed (that is to say, in scanties, or whatever they were called then, and a silk dressing-gown), sitting by what had evidently been the comfortable fire always left for her by a maid who lived out. Nobody else, as far as could be discovered, had been in the flat that night. Maisie had drunk a cup of coffee — and there had been poison in the coffee.

The whole thing was extraordinary. Sentimentalists said she must have been stricken with remorse over Roddie. The young airman, and a few others, were questioned; and all said there had been no more than the usual bickerings and kissings and partings and reconciliations. All swore there had never been anything wrong in their relations with Maisie. Of course. At the theatre they said she had been "her normal bright self." Nothing was found in the way of finger-prints, burned paper, or bruises; and in the absence of any information about the buying of poison, motive for suicide, or motive for murder, the inquest jury returned an open verdict. If Roddie had been alive, things would have been different; but Roddie had been three months in his urn — so he was not suspected.

Out in Egypt I couldn't help remembering her look of pathetic innocence as she sang *I'm a One-Boy Girl;* and being a natural star-gazer, especially when the stars are bright over the desert, I found myself wondering whether she might really have loved Roddie. Supposing she had loved him, and felt the way emotional women do that she had somehow been responsible for his death, might she not have decided, at the height of triumph, that she'd had enough?

That mood passed. The excitement died down. And then, one day, I saw an announcement among the publishers' ads.

RUEFUL GRIMACE
by Roderick Tracker
A Man Tells After Death
The Truth about His Life and Loves
FEATHERFEW

That was all. There was no attempt to amplify the sensationalism of the description . . .

I had known nothing of the wild activity in the private hospital. Sam had not said a word about his possession of the manuscript. The whole thing was a surprise to me; and when the book appeared, having been rushed out to me with what I felt was deplorable bad taste, it was a week or two before I brought myself to read it. By that time it was the talk of the town, and well on its way to what I now understand has been a million-copy sale.

What a book! When I did read it I felt it blew the gaff so thoroughly on

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Roddie and Maisie, singly and collectively, that I had no more sentimental thoughts about either of them. I suppose no more vitriolic portrait of a woman has ever been painted in words. The devilish destructive brilliance of it cannot be questioned. The chap knew he was dying, knew he hadn't a friend in the world except Sam, and spat poison with his last breath.

Some may doubt the propriety of publishing this book (wrote Sam in his foreword). *I merely obey Roderick Tracker's dying wish that it should be given to the world at the earliest possible moment.*

Reviewers who keep moral indignation on tap flayed old Sam. They flayed Roddie. Maisie, being a woman, escaped their wrath. And I understood Sam's action better when I received his check for the £500. "Dear old boy," he wrote; "You didn't know what you were doing when you sent me this cash. I was done. Printers, binders — all on my trail; and of course I'd sunk every penny I had in Roddie's book — easing him out of life, as it were. That's all over now. I'm in clover. Your loan gave me breathing space . . ."

He added that he expected to net £50,000 from world sales of *Rueful Grimace*.

Now let's go back to Calloway. Have you forgotten him? He's the fellow nobody remembers. He leads an almost perfectly anonymous life, and when we're together I forget he's a policeman. It's a part of his genius to be forgotten.

One night he and I were at the Club discussing, if you please, the stories of Franz Kafka, in whom he's interested. I suppose it's like a bus-man's holiday for Calloway to pursue all the hints. I cannot remember what he was saying about Kafka, and in any case it doesn't matter. The point is that in the middle of the discussion Sam came into the smoking-room. Not seeing Calloway, he came over to me, and when he realized that I had a companion he sheered off again. I let him go.

"Who's your friend?" Calloway asked. I told him. "Oh," said Calloway, "he's made a tidy packet over that dirty book, I suppose."

"Dirty in every way," I agreed. "Yes, a tidy packet. The remarkable thing is that he was broke when he published it."

"How did he happen to get hold of it?"

I explained the circumstances.

"He had it in his safe. Must have been frightfully tantalizing to him, to know he had a best-seller he couldn't publish. But in the end he was lucky."

"In fact, he was the only person who stood to gain by Maisie's death," remarked Calloway, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

"Good God!" I exclaimed.

We both watched Sam as he took

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his seat on the other side of the smoking-room. He was perfectly at ease.

I had no business to meddle in what followed; but it so chanced that I was with Sam in his office when Calloway was shown in. The man who was with Calloway was a stranger to me. Sam looked at them both. His lean face, not unlike the drawings of Sherlock Holmes, became a mask; but he quickly knew why they were there, because Calloway told him. The usual thing. "I think you may be able to help us." No fuss, no accusation. We all knew that nobody had any evidence. And yet it was obvious that, as *Rueful Grimace* could not have been published until Maisie was dead, Sam had been overhasty in sending it to the printers while she was still alive. Nothing could explain that fact away. He said, after a few quiet lies:

"Yes, that was where I went wrong. I was quite at the end of my strength. Things were at their worst. The £500 that Joe here had lent me was only a temporary aid. I needed ten times that to meet my obligations, and the trouble with a firm like mine is that once a rumor starts you're finished. Well, I had that manuscript in the safe. I knew it would put me right. And I couldn't use it. A great temptation, you know!"

"Murder, Mr. Featherfew," Calloway laconically reminded him.

"I screwed myself to it," he said. "I told myself she deserved to die; and it was her or myself. So I arranged to see her. Quite easy in the Blackout. We talked. I showed her the manuscript — parts of it. She was interested. I wasn't trying to frighten her. I just showed her parts, so as to distract her attention. I then made some coffee for us both. She died almost at once. The pain was intense while it lasted, but it was soon over. Then I had the job of removing all traces of my visit. I did that successfully, I think."

"Completely," agreed Calloway. "You made the coffee?"

"Yes, while Maisie was reading."

"You knew her pretty well, then? That didn't come out anywhere."

"I naturally didn't want it to come out."

"Yes, we're used to that. What's less usual is that in spite of checks we didn't find it out."

"I never saw her in England. You knew she wasn't English? My name's not really Featherfew. Hers wasn't what she called herself."

"We knew that about her. Not about you. Where did you know her?"

"Oh, abroad, somewhere."

"Hmm. We can get that later. You knew her well enough for her to trust you to make the coffee in her flat?"

"Yes," said Sam. I saw him moisten his lips. I felt terribly sorry for him. "Yes. She was my wife. Rather fond of me in the old days — when we were young. I was fond of her, too. That was what made it . . . so difficult."

He pitched forward, fainting, in his chair.

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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

A new Dr. Sam: Johnson story by Lillian de la Torre is always an event — a literary event. Dr. Sam: Johnson was born in the pages of EQMM, and the only volume, to date, of his "adventures and memoirs" is one of the key books in the history of the modern detective short story (Queen's Quorum, Number 100). For ingenuity of plot and sheer readability, "The Stroke of Thirteen" is one of the finest tales of Dr. Sam: Johnson yet to come from Miss de la Torre's crow-quill pen . . .

The author tells us that she went a long way for the anecdote on which "The Stroke of Thirteen" is based — all the way to Arequipa, Peru! There, while staying at the famous Quinta Bates, she found some rare old English books, and in one of them was the germ of the newest Dr. Sam: Johnson story.

The author tells something else, and for some readers it may represent a criminological challenge. "The Stroke of Thirteen," says Miss de la Torre, has a special "gimmick" for the specialist: anyone deeply versed in criminal lore can know the hidden truth of the story before finishing the very first page. But we warn you, it's a stiff test of erudition — in the field of real-life crime. We confess that it was light-years above our heads. We read the story for its undiluted enjoyment, and we hope you do the same . . . and at the end of the tale, just to satisfy your curiosity, we will give you Miss de la Torre's own explanation of how the story can be solved on its first page.

THE STROKE OF THIRTEEN

by LILLIAN DE LA TORRE

(as told by James Boswell, August, 1780)

"CAPTAIN DONELLAN," SAID THE soldier at the bar, "and gentlemen all, I assure you I was not asleep at my post; and to proof, as I stood there, *I heard the great bell of St. Paul's strike 13.*"

The officers of the court-martial took this with blank amazement, which was broken when their senior broke into a roar of laughter, and the entire assemblage felt free to follow suit. A bull-throated sergeant laughed the loudest.

"Struck 13, my —," he sneered coarsely. "It struck 12, and I caught you napping, my dainty gentleman."

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"You lie!" cried the accused soldier angrily.

The sergeant up with his cane and struck the young red-coat a savage slash across the face. In a trice the culprit had caught him by his thick throat, and the al fresco court was in confusion.

Two soldiers pulled off the raging young fellow. The thick-necked sergeant stood his ground with a sneer.

"That will do, Sergeant Thacker," the icy voice of the officer presiding dominated the tumult. "You have been heard, and your evidence will be attended to."

The rebuked sergeant saluted. Out of the corner of his mouth he grinned wolfishly at his adversary, who now stood scowling between his guards.

"As to the stroke of 13, Macdonald," the captain said to the red-coat, "never a clock in this world struck 13 save in dream. Your own mouth has condemned you. How say you, gentlemen of the court?"

"Guilty. Death," breathed an exquisite young ensign, fingering his ruffles.

"Death," grunted a thick-set lieutenant with a blue jowl, and yawned prodigiously.

"Guilty, death. Death," mumbled the other two officers hastily.

"Guilty, and so say we all. Private Allan Macdonald!"

The unfortunate youth stiffened to attention. He was a fine figure of a soldier, in the first bloom of his manhood, his red coat with its buff facings setting off his graceful tall form to perfection. The torchlight flickered on his tawny hair and marble-white, marble-handsome face. The mark of the sergeant's cane burned on one cheek like a brand.

I regarded the scene with emotion. A drumhead court-martial! At such stirring scenes might my days have been passed, as *Captain* James Boswell, had my scheam of life prevailed. But alas, 'twas mine to propose, my father's to dispose; so now, as *Advocate* James Boswell, I was in attendance at this military drama by pure chance. I had risen before dawn to ride in Hyde Park and admire, as it first stirred awake, the encampment of the military that graced the greensward there in that war summer of 1780. The light of the torches had drawn me, with many another early wanderer, to the scene.

As I saw it from the vantage-point of my light chaise, the picture is engraved on my memory. Before the white tent with its red top the officers of the court were ranged upon a crude bench, brave in full uniform, sashed, cockaded, splendid. To one side, a lanky soldier sat upon a three-legged stool and wrote with scratching quill. His desk was a tall regimental drum, and as he attacked a more difficult passage, the drum murmured with the impact. The young soldier stood death-still. The burly sergeant crossed his arms and sneered.

The presiding officer spoke. I much admired him. His powdered wig set off his fresh-coloured, handsome face, with the high nose of a soldier, the

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curved lip of a lover, and the well-opened, clear grey eye of a scholar. I envied him his red coat with gold braid, his officer's sash, his white breeches without a wrinkle, his polished gorget and silver-hilted sword. Just such a military figure would I have desired to be.

"Private Allan Macdonald!" he pronounced. "Insomuch as it is provided by the sixth article of the fourteenth section of the Articles of War that 'whatever Centinel shall be found sleeping upon his Post, shall suffer Death'; insomuch as you have been found guilty of that offence; it is the sentence of this court-martial that you be summarily shot. And since you are so adept at counting the strokes of St. Paul's," added the officer with macabre humour, "let it be at the stroke of noon, this very day, before Cumberland Gate, where the offence was committed. Take him away."

As the officers rose, my attention was diverted from the doomed soldier by a disturbance among the riff-raff and hangers-on.

"He's in a fit!" screamed a brawny milk-woman, pointing to a figure at her feet.

"Give him air!" cried a bony scavenger besmirched from head to foot, naming the commodity most to be wished for in his vicinity.

"Stand back!" commanded a watchman, jerking his staff.

"Ye'll murther the lad," cried a brawny Irish porter with noseless face, "for 'tis kilt he is already!"

I looked down from my chaise and saw the lad in question, fallen among them like a bundle of slops. He was a pretty boy, shabbily cloathed in someone else's waistcoat and breeches, a world too wide for him. In lieu of wig he wore a clout tied tight about his head, and his hat was fallen to the sward.

"Hand him up here, good fellows," cried I, "and I'll carry him to a surgeon to be blooded."

Twenty willing hands heaved the light form into the chaise, and the milk-woman threw his hat in after.

"Loose his headkerchief before he choaks," cried she, so positively that I complied with her wrong-headed admonition instanter.

By this means I made a discovery of a most interesting nature. No sooner was the clout loosed than down tumbled a cloud of palest gold ringlets — — 'twas no boy, but a girl of the most fragile and feminine beauty!

This discovery put me into a quandary. I could not abandon this delicate creature to some coarse surgeon, still less turn her back to the mercies of the rough crowd. I resolved to carry the child to Bolt Court and put her under the care of Mr. Levett the surgeon — the more that thither I was already engaged to go betimes to break my fast with my learned friend Dr. Sam: Johnson.

As I pulled up my chaise at Bolt Court, the sun was risen. So was not Dr. Johnson, who held strongly to the opinion, as I have elsewhere set forth,

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that the happiest hours of a man's life are those he spends lying in bed in the morning.

But Levett was stirring, the kitchen surgeon whom Johnson maintained in his motley establishment. The trembling girl, conscious now and sobbing, became his charge. As he ministered to her, they seemed to me most like some old woodcut of Miranda and Caliban, she so fair and young, he like an old *Brownie*, with his seamy, dusty countenance, his matted old dark wig, his swarthy skin, his square-toed shoes, and his ancient, full-skirted coat. As he brandished the hartshorn bottle, he might have been taken for some old-time alchemist, tanned like a bull's-hide in the fumes of his own crucible.

Miranda was sitting up in the great winged chair, still white as porcelain, but composed and calm, and *Caliban* was regarding his handiwork with satisfaction, when the door opened, and there entered the bulky form of the *Prospero* of Bolt Court — Dr. Sam: Johnson, philosopher, lexicographer, and detector of crime and chicane.

Dr. Johnson was now in his seventy-first year. That year was a rosy sunset for him, what the Colonists would call his Indian Summer. Never have I seen him so gay and good-humoured, so sociable and comfortable. Benevolence played on his craggy features and beamed from his piercing light-grey eyes. He shewed in his attire the unwonted haste of his rising, for his brown waistcoat was skip-buttoned, and his bushy grey wig, that knew the comb no more than a quickset hedge, rode precariously over one ear. But grandly unmindful of wig and waistcoat, the great Cham entered the room like a King to his courtiers, and he handed in his companion as if she had been a Queen.

His companion was a pale shrunken little old lady, ceremonially decked in scarlet of a by-gone fashion. Her face was meagre and her china-pale eyes were sightless. This was Miss Anna Williams, the blind poetess, who had long presided over Dr. Johnson's tea-tray. The tea-tray itself followed hard on her heels in the black hands of the servant Francis Barber.

Greetings were soon exchanged; but Dr. Johnson absolutely declined to tackle any problem fasting:

"Not a word, my dear," said he to the girl, "till you have taken your tea."

We were a strange consult, I reflected as we fell to, to take under our protection this fragile bisque statuette in the rumpled male attire. She sat rigid in her chair, and though she touched the tea to her lip, no morsel passed her throat. Taciturn Levett gulped bits of crust; Miss Williams delicately groped up a bird-bite or two; Dr. Sam: Johnson drank tea in Olympian draughts, while I addressed myself to (O felicity!) the marmalade, and drank in, no less delicious, the girl's beauty. 'Twas a catalogue of perfection — arched brows over eyes of melting violet, straight nose gently retroussée at the tip, short upper lip,

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bee-stung mouth, chin a perfect oval, curls in a tangle like finest yellow silk a kitten stirs. No blood rose under the transparent skin; the girl sat like a marble statue on a tomb.

At last Dr. Johnson, replete with his seventh cup of tea, pushed back from the old-fashioned mahogany table.

"Pray, my dear, give us your story."

"You must wonder," began she, in a voice like a small silver bell, "what brought me to the soldiers' camp at such an hour, in such attire. I beg you will not think ill of me. I have done no wrong; and for my folly I am paid and overpaid."

Her voice faltered, and I thought she would weep, but she mastered herself and went on.

"My name is Lucinda Locke. My father is a rich merchant of Bristol. My mother died when my brother was born. That was fourteen years ago. Last year, in an evil hour, my father looked up from his ledgers and perceived that my brother was running wild about the wharves while I turned frump at home. He looked attentively at me, and concluded, how wisely I know not, that if Elizabeth Gunning the Irish beauty could have her choice of Dukes, so could I too.

"So to London we came, where Dukes abound. Soon I was surrounded by suitors; but none would do. The Alderman's son was a lout; the Duke's son was a rake; and Captain Donellan, though handsome and accomplished, was twice my age, and had naught at all but his pay. Yet so runs the world, of all of them he has been the kindest friend to me.

"Meanwhile for my brother there must be a tutor to make a gentleman of him. A little Latin, and the genteel accomplishments, as dancing and sword-play, of which my father accounts sword-play first. My father is a direct man. He sets out to find my brother a tutor — where do you think? — at the *salle d'armes* of the great Angelo. He asks for a master of fence with a smattering of Latin; and he gets Allan Macdonald."

On the name her voice broke at last.

"Allan Macdonald is a gentleman," she went on, commanding herself. "His father was a cadet of Macdonald of Keppoch, who was ruined in the '45. Allan was bred a scholar and a swordsman, and maintains himself by his skill, and where is the harm in that?"

"Sure if I take you aright," remarked I, "he maintains himself upon the King's fivepence a day, or did until — " I stopped short, suddenly realizing in what peril the young Scotchman stood.

"My fault, my fault," cried she. "But for me he would still be a free man. I loved him from the moment I saw him, and he me. We were the two halves of one coin, the words of a song to its music. . . " The silver voice trailed off, and the violet eyes looked back into sunshine.

"I was sixteen," she remembered

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ruefully, "and I had never been crossed. I went to my father, and asked him to wed me to Allan Macdonald. I would know better now. He was turned off, and I was watched close; and Allan Macdonald took the King's shilling. But for Captain Donellan I should have despaired indeed. But he took Allan into his own company, and protected him from the brutality of the sergeant, and carried my letters to keep up his heart; and he was working for Allan's discharge. But the American war made a difficulty — and in short, gentlemen, I tired of waiting. So I sent a message by Captain Donellan, and bespoke the Captain's attendance for the sake of propriety, and dighted myself for safety in the weeds you see me in, and went to Hyde Park before dawn. But I came too late. The hateful sergeant had done his work too well; I came only in time to hear Allan Macdonald unjustly condemned to die — to die this very day at the stroke of noon. Dr. Johnson, you must make haste and save him."

"Why, my poor dear, what's to be done? Can I step between your lover and the muskets?"

"There must be a way — there *must* be a way!"

"There's the Leyden battery," pronounced Miss Williams in her old voice like the rustling of a leaf. "We may electrize the young man after he's — hem, when I assisted Dr. Gray, the noted Electrician, the Leyden battery worked wonders with deceased frogs."

"Tut, Miss Williams," said Dr. Johnson testily, "this is not a matter of frogs."

Miss Williams bridled, but said no more.

"I'll mix the captain a dose," volunteered Mr. Levett.

"You mean the sergeant?" I enquired.

"No, sir, the captain, him that hollos *Fire!*"

"Now, sir," said Johnson severely, "you've taken leave of your senses, to propose so coolly to give a soldier of the King a poison dose."

"No, sir, no poison dose, but say a great purge or a sleepy draught, shall occupy him otherwise till the stroke of noon be past."

"Foh," says Johnson, "there's officers enough in the regiment to hollo *Fire*, I warrant you. We must go another way to work."

"Allan protests his innocence," said Lucinda. "We must prove it."

"Prove it, my dear? In four hours? This is a labour of Hercules."

"And who so fit for the part of the Greek hero?" I enquired, viewing the great frame, the massive limbs, the large shapely hands of my friend.

"Well, well, as yet the cause of Allan Macdonald is Greek to me. But I will try to construe it. Pray, Mr. Boswell, you're a lawyer, detail me the case against him."

"Sir," said I, "the case against him is simple and damning. Allan goes on watch at Cumberland Gate. Midnight is scarce past when along comes Sergeant Thacker on his rounds. He

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finds Allan sleeping away at his post."

"He lies," cried Lucinda. "He hates Allan. He is wishful to lie his life away."

"What says Allan? Has he no counter-proof?"

"Only," said I, "the stroke of 13."

"Thirteen? How is this proof?"

"Sir," said I, "Allan Macdonald avers that, waking as he stood his watch, he heard the great bell of St. Paul's strike 13."

"And others heard it?"

"Nay, I know not."

"There's one, that's certain. Sergeant Thacker."

"Nay, sir, he denies it."

"So he would," cried Lucinda hotly. "Yet there must be a way to prove it. There *must* be a way!"

She started to her feet, all languor shed.

"Why do we sit here wasting time? Let us go at once!"

"Go? Whither?"

"To St. Paul's! To Hyde Park! To Allan! Anywhere, save sitting here while the sands run out!"

"Child, child," said Dr. Johnsŏn mildly, "not in those garments."

"You are right, sir. I'll send for woman's gear. But there's no time to lose. Do you and Mr. Boswell go at once, and send me word where we may meet."

St. Paul's clock was striking 9 as we entered Hyde Park Corner. A small bandy-legged sentry admitted us to the park without parley.

'Twas a sight to warm the blood. The conical red-topped white tents, the showy uniforms, the stands of arms, the waving standards, the park of artillery, the rows of picketed horses, and all the other paraphernalia of military life sparkled in the sunshine on the greensward and shimmered under the broad shade of the trees.

"A camp," observed Johnson sententiously, "is one of the great scenes of human life."

'Twas so indeed. Here a gallant grenadier in sugar-loaf cap dallies with some trim milliner's apprentice. There a sutler's booth displays a board "Pool's intire Butt Beer. Fine Ale and Amber," and the soldiers gather round. Hard by, the beautiful Duchess of Devonshire, clad *en militaire*, epauletted and cockaded, stands siege of a dozen red coats.

Soon we drew rein before the tent of the court-martial. 'Twas a brave sight in full sun, with the company standard waving before it, and the red of its peak repeated in a bed of flowers sparkling beside it like a pool of blood, a wave of full-blooded ruffled blooms like scarlet silk, with blackness at the heart.

Before the tent sat Captain Donellan. His cockaded hat lay upon the bench beside him. His waistcoat was unbuttoned; he wore a red flower over his ear, and sat reading upon an octavo in red leather.

When we presented ourselves, the Captain was eager to welcome us. He had heard of *Dictionary* Johnson. He must needs display his domain, and

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Dr. Johnson willingly observed the little niceties of life in the field. He much admired the patent camp bed and the chair that folded so neatly, the ingenious writing-stand and the rack of books. As was his wont, he lingered to read the titles, holding one book after another close to his near-sighted eyes and muttering: a Shakespeare, a Pope, Wolfe's *Instructions*, Dodd's *Sermons*, Linnaeus' *Genera Plantarum*, the physical volumes of Mead.

As we withdrew, to take our ease upon the bench, Dr. Johnson leaned with a grunt and picked up from the ground, where Allan and the sergeant had locked in combat, a little instrument of unknown use. 'Twas four sharp-clawed prongs bound together with a handle of cord. He extended it to the captain. The soldier's brows drew down.

"What's this instrument of torture?" he muttered. "And whence came it? If Thacker —" He broke off. "Pray, gentlemen, be seated."

As Johnson seated himself, he indicated with a smile the rippling pool of crimson flowers.

" 'Not poppy, nor mandragora,' " he quoted from *Othello*, " 'Shall ever med'cine thee to that sweet sleep that thou owed'st yesterday' . . . or should I rather cite Linnaeus? For which, poet or philosopher, do you give camp-room to this red-coat regiment?"

"For Linnaeus," replied Donellan, giving smile for smile. " 'Tis sheer necessity that has set me a-gardening and a-soldiering in one summer, for I brought these with me from the East Indies, and I was unwilling to let their propagation lapse, even in the field. But come, sirs, how can I serve you?"

"You can serve Lucinda Locke."

Captain Donellan started.

"What do you know of Lucinda Locke?"

When he heard, he was filled with compunction.

" 'Pon honour, Dr. Johnson, I would give £1000 that matters had taken another turn. But how comes Lucinda to be running about thus in boy's attire? Upon young Macdonald's misfortune, I sent her a message, on no account to keep our rendezvous."

"Then your message miscarried."

" 'Sdeath and blood (scowling darkly), if my messenger failed me I'll have the hide off his back!"

"Well, well, sir, but will you serve Miss Locke and save young Allan?"

Captain Donellan lifted shoulder and brow, and slowly and ruefully shook his head.

"I have done all I could. The lad's offence, being in time of war, is not to be extenuated; he must be shot as an example."

"But if he be innocent?"

"Who can say he is innocent? When he leaned incapable, snorting like a pig? When he reeked of rum? When he was scarce to be shook awake?"

"Yet he avers he was waking."

"Waking? And heard the great bell of St. Paul's —"

"This is not impossible," said John-

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son quickly, "if the wind sets right."

As if to prove his contention, at this moment the great bell gave voice: 10 o'clock.

"But he avers it struck 13!"

"And did it?"

"How could it?"

"That's to be seen. I shall make it my first point of inquiry."

"Well said, Dr. Johnson!" exclaimed Donellan, fired with hope. "For if he's innocent, he may yet be saved."

"I'll set about it. Where's Thacker?"

"Thacker? Thacker is cock-sure. You'll get no help from Thacker."

"Yet I'll see him. Where is he?"

"He's on duty."

"Where?"

"At the Hercules' Pillars."

"Happy he, to be posted at a publick house!" cried Johnson, smiling. "And where's the prisoner?"

"I regret, Dr. Johnson; you cannot see the prisoner."

"Yet (sternly) you'd not hurl him out of this world unprepared? I'll send him a man of God. Where is he?"

"At the Hercules' Pillars."

"Surely this is irregular?"

"He is committed to the nearest place of safety. Stay, this writing —" Captain Donellan scrawled a line on his tablets — "this writing will admit your man of God."

Our man of God was the Rector of All Hallows Staining, for whom we had done some slight service in the matter of the manifestations in Mincing Lane. We sent a sedan chair for him, with command to turn in at Bolt Court and fetch Lucinda Locke on the way. Then we betook ourselves to the Hercules' Pillars.

'Twas a snug little tavern at the edge of Hyde Park. The first sight that met our eyes as we entered the tap-room was Sergeant Thacker. He was alternating a pull at his ale-pot and a pull at the barmaid, whom he held clipped about her ample waist as she sat on his brawny knee. His broad phiz had a hard shine, and he breathed heavily through his nose. His armament was set by, his waistcoat gapped unbuttoned. Opposite him, grinning into a pot of ale, sat a skinny soldier as unbuttoned as he.

We made bold to stand them a fresh pot. The bar-maid flounced off to fetch it. At the prospect the grins broadened, but a scowl superseded when we named Allan Macdonald.

"Him? *Gentleman* Macdonald?" grunted the sergeant. "He'll come to no good in the ranks — so I said to Captain Donellan."

"And so it fell out," concurred his red-coated toady.

The sergeant glowered with a sense of grievance.

"Handle him easy, says the captain, he's a gentleman. Ho! A gentleman! I found means to harden him up, I'll lay my davy — there's no place for a gentleman in *my* squad, so there isn't."

"Aye, Ned, so there isn't," seconded his chorus.

"Stow your jaw! But he'd a lily liver, did young Macdonald. Sleeping on sentry-go! Cry for your Nannie,

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do, says I. Well, I'm rid of him, or shall be within the day."

The callous brute took a long swig at his pot and exhaled with satisfaction.

"You're certain he slept?" Dr. Johnson put it to him.

Thacker looked my venerable companion flat in the eye.

"Aye, I'm certain, and I'll thank you to mind your business, old square-toes."

"Aye, mind your business, old put, for the sergeant is certain, and so am I."

Dr. Johnson ignored the double affront.

"You at least were waking, sergeant — did Paul's clock strike 13?"

"What a pox," cries the sergeant rudely, "has all the world gone mad? When did any man ever hear tell of a clock that could strike 13? No, sir. I counted the strokes, it being then time for my rounds; and the number of strokes was 12."

"It was so," chimed in the grinning soldier, "for so did I count 'em too, more by token I had just flung the captain's note over the young lady's gate, and as I came away Paul's clock struck 12 as I'm alive; 'twas 12, I'll stand to it, eh, Ned?"

"I misdoubt you can count to twelve," his companion crushed him, "so stubble your whids, do."

"As a man stands watch under the arch of Cumberland Gate," I struck in, "is there never an echo might gather in the concavity?"

"Echo, concavity, bah!" cried the sergeant. "Give over! The pot's dry, and so am I."

As the pot was replenishing, the door was pushed slowly open, and there entered, looking mighty out of place, a thin, apologetic clergyman, our friend the good rector. He handed Miss Locke, now doubly beautiful in a pale gown of India muslin with round sash, like a good child.

Sergeant Thacker scowled over the rector's paper of permission, but he honoured it.

"This way, sir," said the bar-maid.

The rector followed her, and we boldly followed him. Nose in pot, the sergeant made no move to stop us as we all four descended the rough stone stair together.

We found Allan Macdonald in the ale-cellar, still in his red coat, with three of his comrades to guard him. Having broached a butt of ale, they were warmed with its contents. They admitted us with a right good will. Lucinda Locke went straight into the prisoner's arms.

"O Allan, Allan," cried she, "why did you leave me? Why did you 'list?"

The young soldier held her off at arms' length.

"*I* leave *you?*" he cried. "When you turned me off without a word of farewell? When you sent me back my gifts and would see me no more? What should I do but 'list and die?"

"I never, I!" cried the girl. "They were taken from me. My father tricked you. But let be, you shan't die. Captain Donellan is our friend, he'll save you yet."

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"He'd best be quick," said the young Scot drily.

"He had all in train to obtain your discharge, but for the difficulty of the war," lamented Lucinda. "We were consulting daily, and you were as good as free. Why did this happen?"

"Who knows?" asked Allen gently. "I know I have done no wrong. Keep up your heart, my sweeting."

Lucinda clung without speech to the scarlet bosom.

"Pray, sir," said Dr. Johnson, "answer me a question or two."

"Your servant, sir. Ask what you please."

"Are you certain you heard the clock strike 13?"

"As I stand here. I was watching a sinking star, and musing upon Lucinda, and upon the long ill luck of the house of Keppoch. I feared to hear a *taisk*, a voice of ill omen at the midnight, and when I heard the great bell tolling I counted each stroke — 'twas the unlucky number, 'twas 13, clear upon the dark air, and as it were coloured crimson."

"Coloured crimson!" I ejaculated. "Were you drunk?"

"No, sir. I hope I am a better soldier than to go drunk to my duty."

"Did you reek of rum?"

"There was rum issued, it being the captain's birth-day; but the captain's my witness I took but the one tot, he desiring me to pledge his health in it, and all the guard did the same."

Lucinda stirred and stood off.

"I must go to Captain Donellan. But first we have some business."

"Business?"

"For what do you think I came to the camp before the dawn? 'Twas for this."

She drew from her bosom a paper and a pair of rings and extended them wordlessly. The paper was a special license for the marriage of Allan Macdonald, bachelor, with Lucinda Locke, spinster. The young soldier gave it one glance, fell to his knee, and kissed her hand. She touched his red head tenderly.

"I tired," she said softly, "of sending you messages and having no answer, and hearing that the sergeant detained you at your duties. I resolved to have you at once or let you go forever. I came too late. They had you at the drumhead, and instead of the words of marriage I heard you condemned to die."

"Though I die you shall have me," cried the boy passionately, "since now I learn that that is your will."

"We have missed the rendezvous with my clergyman, by some hours missed it," said Lucinda, "but here's a man of God may tie the knot, and I beseech you, sir," (turning to the dumb-founded rector) "to make us one this instant, for there's little time left to lose."

So saying, she sank to her knees beside her lover, and the rector plucked out his book and began:

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together in the sight of God and this company . . ."

I looked about at the company. Never was a stranger wedding scene.

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The fat soldier slid down from the butt where he sprawled and shouldered his piece in deference to the solemnity of the occasion. The two on the stone step set down their pots and stared. The greenish, damp walls glistened in the half dark. The young soldier knelt like marble, the blonde lass lifted her head proudly. Only as she uttered ". . . till death do us part" did her clear voice break into a sob. When rings had been exchanged they clung together as if they had been made one indeed.

"Sir and madam," said Dr. Johnson, signing the paper as witness, "I give you joy, and if God wills it and I may prevail, for many years. I must be off; but if you be gone from hence before my errand is done, then look for me before Cumberland Gate."

So saying, he departed, leaving Mistress Lucinda to my charge; and as he mounted the stair in the half dark, the great bell tolled the hour: 11 o'clock.

Captain Donellan was not to be found. Lucinda was nigh despair as at last we turned our way toward Cumberland Gate. The ill-omened "three-legged mare," the triangular gallows of Tyburn, was in our eye as we neared the place where, saving a miracle, Allan Macdonald must die. The girl's knees buckled, and but for my support she would have fallen, as we heard from the park the long drum roll of the Dead March.

We pushed our way through the starers clustered at Cumberland Gate. There was Captain Donellan's company drawn up in full regalia before the rifle butts. Many a recruit looked greenish and sick, many an old soldier was liquored; but they stood stiff and sombre to see their comrade die. Only on Sergeant Thacker's greasy face was the grin still fixed.

I supported Lucinda forward. Behind us other footsteps came on, and then Mr. Levett stood beside us. He wore an old broad-brimmed hat, and carried a large green baize bag, to which with many a jerk and beck he invited my attention. Lucinda spared him not a glance. Her widened eyes were fixed on the firing squad, standing waiting with muskets a-trail, while Captain Donellan, hand to sword, waited too.

Against the towering twenty-foot earth rampart of the rifle butts, Allan Macdonald looked small and alone, though he stood proudly tall. His hands were free; I could distinctly see the wedding ring on his finger. I looked at my watch; it wanted but one minute to mid-day. Captain Donellan drew his sword.

At that instant Dr. Sam: Johnson, dishevelled and dusty, ran swiftly, though with ungainly motion, through the brick arch of Cumberland Gate. As he neared the rampart, the first stroke of the hour sounded.

One!

Captain Donellan lifted his sword.

"Make ready!" he cried.

Two!

I found I was counting aloud.

"Wait!" cries Sam: Johnson.

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Three!

"Wait for what?" cries Donellan. "He's waited long enough."

Four!

"For the last stroke," says Johnson.

Five!

"Five!" counts Johnson. "Give him his chance."

Six!

"His chance is over," says Donellan.

Seven!

"Present!" The muskets went up to the shoulder.

Eight!

With deliberate calm Dr. Sam: Johnson stepped into the line of fire.

"You'll wait till the last stroke," said he.

Nine!

"No!" cries young Macdonald, shaken out of his iron calm.

Ten!

"Quiet, boy," says Johnson. "Don't think I plan to be shot in your stead. Be still and listen."

Eleven!

Lucinda put up her hands to her ears.

Twelve!

Donellan raised his sword again, but Johnson did not budge. "Hist!" said he.

Unmistakable in the death-like silence sounded the stroke of—

Thirteen!

The silence broke in a wild burst of huzzas. Allan's comrades threw up their hats, threw down their muskets, broke their ranks, and danced on the sward. Somehow Lucinda got from my side and into Allan's arms. I found myself pumping my companion's venerable hand. Little Levett jigged with his green baize bag. Only Captain Donellan, white with rage, shouted in vain to quell the tumult. We left him shouting, and rolled away, piled somehow hugger-mugger into the chaise, for the wedding breakfast Allan Macdonald had never hoped to eat. I little guessed that the full story was yet to be told.

The scene of our rejoicing was the Hercules' Pillars, where one short hour ago we had seen a wedding and an eternal leave-taking; but this time 'twas in the best room above stairs. There Lucinda took the liberty to laugh a little and cry a little, all at once; and Allan took the liberty to cherish her in his arms for a space; while Dr. Johnson, Mr. Levett, and I exchanged mutual congratulations on the happy outcome. With a gap-toothed grin Mr. Levett turned out his green baize bag; it contained a prodigious Leyden jar. At this Allan merely looked puzzled; but Lucinda began laughing in earnest; and the cloth being laid, we all fell to.

We discussed a joint and a mighty veal pye, washed down with a bowl of Dr. Johnson's "poonch" in which we repeatedly toasted the wedding pair, rejoicing over the wedding lines, and over a new writing which Dr. Johnson now produced from his capacious waistcoat pocket.

"'Twas the best I could obtain, argue as I might, but it served."

'Twas writ in Dr. Johnson's elegant

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small hand, and signed with a scrawl by the commander:

If the Clock strike Thirteen, Macdonald is pardoned, and let him be forthwith honourably discharged.
GLOUCESTER
General Commanding

"Discharged!" cried Lucinda. "All's to a wish!"

Upon that refrain they departed; and indeed from that day all was to their wish, and now they have seven fine sons and a handsome competency.

"Yet, sir," said I as, left to our two selves, we prepared a fresh onslaught on the veal pye, "here's somewhat that is dark. There's a saying, 'regular as clock-work.' How comes a respectable clock-work to so far forget itself as to strike 13?"

"Sir," said Dr. Johnson, "it does not so. Rather it strikes *12*, and immediately thereafter without intermission it strikes the next hour, namely *one;* which being summed is *13*."

"Yet why should it strike two hours together without intermission?"

"The reason is found in the nature of the striking mechanism," replied my ingenious friend. "A clock must strike when the minute hand comes full circle to the number twelve. Accordingly, it is so arranged that when the minute hand comes to twelve, it raises a catch which sets the striking mechanism going, and so many strokes result as the space before the next notch allows. When the time for the right number of strokes is past, along comes the next notch, the catch drops, and the bell is silent until after 60 minutes the minute hand again reaches twelve. Then again the catch lifts, the bell sounds, and the catch drops again into the next notch. But if the notch between, say, twelve and one be *worn smooth*, then the catch does not fall, and the clock strikes 13."

"Remarkable!" cried I. "If Paul's clock lacks a notch, then at midnight it struck both *12* and *1*. But —"

"But?"

"At *1* it must then strike *2*," I puzzled; something seemed at the finger-tip of my wits, almost within reach.

"This follows."

"And so with every hour following, till at *10*, 'twill strike *11*."

"*Sequitur*."

"And at *11* —" I rose to my feet —" 'twill strike *12* and *1* together, which is to say that at *11* 'twill strike *13* —" I levelled my finger at my majestick friend — "and at *12* — 'twill strike *2!* In a word, sir, a clock that strikes 13 at noon can *not* have struck 13 at midnight!"

"O ho, you have hit it!" cried Dr. Sam: Johnson, and putting back his head he gave way to his rolling Homeric laughter.

"Trust me, sir," said I severely, "this is no laughing matter. "Am I to think that at your age and weight you scrambled to the belfry and *tampered* with this ancient clock-work?"

"Aye, sir," replied Dr. Johnson, sobering, "that is what you may think, for that is what I did. 'Twas

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easy to chip away the notch; but the climb to the belfry, that was the labour of Hercules!"

"At midnight, 'tis certain, that clock had struck 12?"

"'Tis certain."

"Then why did Allan Macdonald aver so stoutly that it struck 13?"

"Because musing upon ill luck, he fell asleep and dreamed it."

"Then he was guilty."

"He was guilty; but so vivid was his dream or vision, that he did not know it."

"And to save a guilty man, you tampered with the great bell of St. Paul's and lied to his Grace the Duke of Gloucester!"

"I would gladly have proceeded in a manner less drastic, could argument have prevailed, for I take it for certain that Captain Donellan's drumhead court-martial was irregular from end to end. But the Duke, being stupid, was stubborn. Only the stroke of 13 was strong enough to catch his fancy; so I gave him the stroke of 13, and saved Allan Macdonald."

"'Tis not like you," said I, "to pervert the ends of justice."

"Nor did I so; but on the contrary, I thus baulked, at the last second, as covert and wicked a murderer as ever I beheld."

"A murderer?" said I stupidly.

"Captain Donellan," said my friend.

"Captain Donellan?"

"The penniless captain, who wanted the heiress for himself. When Allan impulsively enlisted, he fell into his enemy's hands. The captain recommends him to his rough sergeant's dislike by the surest means, as a dainty gentleman to be coddled. The captain carries messages, and burkes them, and lies to the lady, all the time making himself her greatest friend and confident. Then the lady resolves to wed her lover out of hand, and the captain is notified. He sees that only death will remove his rival; and he goes about to contrive that death as speedily as may be; and he would have succeeded but for the stroke of 13."

"Yet," I argued, "if Allan Macdonald had been shot for a military crime, how is that murder? For we know he slept upon sentry-go; and how is that to be imputed to Captain Donellan?"

"If Captain Donellan did not plan that it should be so, how did he send word of it to Miss Locke before the event? The sergeant counted the stroke of 12 *before* he started his rounds; but the messenger counted it *after* he had delivered the captain's note."

"Yet how can one man cause another to neglect his watch?"

"The ingenious Captain Donellan," replied Dr. Johnson, "is a disciple of Linnaeus. He grows the oriental poppy. With that cord-handled claw by his tent he sacrifices the capsule of the poppy, as I have been told they do it in the East Indies where he served. He collects the gum that forms. To put a name to it, it is opium. I smelled opium in the affair when I was informed that Allan

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Macdonald had been hearing 'sounds coloured crimson,' as drugged men may do."

"Drugged men?"

"Allan Macdonald slept because he had been drugged with opium. 'Tis plain, he had it of Captain Donellan in that tot of birth-day rum, a coarse liquor well adapted to dissolve the drug and mask its bitter taste. Nor was it the captain's birth-day, I'll lay you a trifle, but the excuse server, and Allan all unsuspecting drank the sleepy dose."

"A dastardly plot!"

"And so simple and safe. 'Tis sure he'll sleep, and as surely the malicious sergeant will catch him at it, snorting like a pig and scarce to be shook awake — an eye-witness description, you'll observe, for Captain Donellan will make it his business to be watching to see that his scheam goes aright.

"Well, I've baulked the scheam, but I can't reach the scheamer. I fear another life, ere all be told, will pay. For Captain Donellan's too clever by half. One day, with help of Dr. Mead's physical volumes, he'll distil a draught more lethal still; and they'll hang him for it, mark my words."

And so, in fact, it fell out; for in 1781 Captain Donellan went on from Mead *On Poisons*, pag. 167, of *opium*, to Mead *On Poisons*, pag. 168, of *laurel water*, a very lethal draught; and then they hanged him. But that is another story — which may be read at large in the *Newgate Calendar.*

The giveaway for the true-crime specialist was in the first two words of "The Stroke of Thirteen" — Captain Donellan. *Experts in criminological lore will know at once that they are in the presence of the ingenious and celebrated distiller of poisons, and with this knowledge at the very beginning of the story will be watching for Captain Donellan to employ one of his famous doses.*

Details about the notorious Captain can be found in CELEBRATED TRIALS . . . *selected by a member of the Philadelphia Bar (Philadelphia: Jesper Harding, 1847). This account is, of course, repeated from earlier ones. Further facts about Captain Donellan are also to be found in George Borrow's* CELEBRATED TRIALS *and in that wondrous compendium,* THE COMPLETE NEWGATE CALENDAR.

Indeed, Dr. Sam: Johnson, as usual, was right. Captain Donellan's taste for chemistry brought him to the gallows in 1781, when he privily distilled laurel water and administered a lethal draught to an inconvenient brother-in-law.

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Surely Faith Baldwin is one of the most popular writers in America today. She has had more than 60 books published, many of them (if not most of them) serialized in national magazines, and a goodly number of them made into motion pictures. True, Faith Baldwin has gone on record as having wanted to be almost anything but a writer — "biologist, obscure scientist, actress, explorer" — but we would be willing to wager that if she really *had her choice, she would elect to be a novelist all over again.*

What are Faith Baldwin's likes and hobbies? (You can tell a lot about a person when you know that person's chief sources of pleasure and relaxation.) Well, Miss Baldwin likes traveling: she has been all over this world of ours — Europe, Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand. She likes to swim and to explore woods. She likes gardens, sunshine, book collecting, beautiful Chinese curios, and people. But most of all, Miss Baldwin likes books — other people's books. All her life, books have been meat and drink to her — and medicine too; they have been stimulus and narcotic, and they have brought her comfort and help. She would rather read than eat or sleep, and she keeps insisting that she would rather read books than write them. Well, maybe that's true; but there are literally millions of people who would vote the other way, who would urge Faith Baldwin to keep "slaving and suffering over her work" and let them — the millions — do the reading.

NIGHT OF THE EXECUTION

by FAITH BALDWIN

ON THE NIGHT THAT CRAGG MUST die, Emily sat silently in the living room of her apartment and watched the inexorable progress of the hands of a mantel clock.

The hour was late. In their night nursery her two children slept and, next door to them, their capable nurse. The other servants had quarters elsewhere in the building. In effect, Emily was alone, under the roof of her particular hive, and, she thought, in her waiting and wincing imagination, that she was not solitary, after all, for Cragg's mother and sister, and those few people who had been, perhaps still were, his friends, also waited and watched a clock. As did his lawyer and, of course, those whose business it was to do so.

Emily need not have been physically alone; several of her friends had

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suggested various ways in which to spend this interminable evening. And she had spent the earlier part of it with Robert Maxwell, who was her lawyer, and also Cragg's. They had dined here in the apartment, for to have been seen in public tonight would have caused comment, however sympathetic.

Emily sat, as relaxed as possible, in a comfortable chair. The room was friendly. She and the children had lived here since the death of her husband and their father. No outward memories of Gideon were in this place. The larger, more formal apartment in which they had once lived had been sold, together with its ornate, valuable furnishings.

The hands of the clock moved. Emily felt the tension in the back of her neck, tightening and painful. If she had any sense she would do as Robert had asked her — which she had promised to do — go to bed, take some sleeping medicine, and sleep, dreamless, until late tomorrow morning. But she could not, although, after he had left her, she had gone to her room and even to the medicine cabinet and taken down the small bottle of forgetfulness.

She thought, "I can't; something compels me to wait until it is over. Perhaps then I can sleep, without the medicine."

So she had put on a dressing gown and returned to the big, quiet room. The only sounds were those of the expiring fire and the ticking of the old mantel clock, always a little fast, as if, because of its age, it hurried, fearing Time must run out.

For Cragg, Time had run out.

Emily closed her dark eyes, and her face was still. It was a graver face than that of most young women; she was just past 30. She was tall, and slight, her coloring subdued, and tonight, without lipstick and rosy powder, very pale. Not, you would say, a pretty woman, but one possessing charm; a charm neither facile nor frayed through conscious exercise. No, it lay in her silences and reserves, her smile, her mannerly, sincere interest in people; and also in her kindness — as, her friends remarked, in the case of the man, Cragg — and her great generosity, which was not merely a matter of money. And also, Robert Maxwell would have told you, in a gentle spirit, in which there was nothing timid nor weak. She had been a devoted, patient wife.

Anyone who could read the papers could have told you the facts. Up until approximately three years ago Emily and her husband, Gideon Rome, had been classified, for the newspaper readers, as social items. She had married, at nineteen, this man, considerably her senior and not particularly distinguished. His money and position were not of his making; only the fact that he had remained a bachelor until he was 30 was a little unusual.

During their marriage the Romes had lived in New York, on their big place in the country, and in various other places which Gideon owned.

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They had also traveled. In the third year the little girl, Cecily, was born; in the fifth the boy, Blake. And three years ago this past autumn Gideon had died in a hunting accident.

That was the first time the Romes made the front pages.

Somewhat more recently a man, occasionally employed upon the Rome country estate, and native to the village near by, had, himself, made headlines. He had killed a woman with whom he was deeply involved. True, he had been drinking at the time, but then he drank much of the time and he had never been known to be, as the saying goes, blind- or staggering-drunk; merely, not sober. His drinking provided no extenuation and the killing had certainly been premeditated; any number of people had testified that he had repeatedly stated he would kill her.

His motive was not hard for the State to prove. This woman had, over several years, bled Cragg of whatever money he had, and continually demanded more. She had also pledged herself to procure a divorce from her husband, an elderly tavern keeper, and marry Cragg. In order to do this, she wrote, in the letters admitted in evidence, she must buy him off. On various occasions, Cragg had obtained sums of money beyond those earned through sporadic work. He had successfully gambled several times; he had borrowed; and, it was suspected, although never proved, that he had been responsible for a number of small robberies.

As for opportunity, he had created it, forcing himself into the woman's house at night, while her husband lay ill in bed upstairs, quarreling with her in a loud voice, calling her the foulest possible names, and finally, while the sick man tried to struggle from his bed, imprisoned by the cast which held his broken leg, Cragg had shot and killed the woman.

Emily Rome had engaged counsel for Cragg, following a visit from his mother. No one in the village was astonished by this, however lost the cause. Emily had known Mrs. Cragg since first she had come here to live. In common with all who knew her, she admired and respected the blunt, hard-working, courageous old woman.

Mrs. Cragg asked no favors from her children nor anyone else. It must have cost her a great deal to walk from her house to the Rome property, posted with no-trespassing notices, walk up the driveway, ring the door chimes, and tell the man who answered that she had come to see Mrs. Rome.

She said, frankly, during the interview, that she had no choice but to believe in Cragg's guilt. She could not even cry out that the woman had deserved killing. For Mrs. Cragg feared God; she knew that both the deserving and undeserving are in His hands. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. She was convinced that God would punish her son and that man and society must exact retribution under the law. Yet, she wished him to live, if possible, although in servitude,

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and, living, to expiate. Above all, she wished him to have a fair trial.

After their talk in the Rome house, which, at the time, Emily was dismantling, as it was on the market, Emily engaged counsel for Mrs. Cragg's son. She engaged Robert Maxwell, long her husband's friend and, since her marriage, hers. He was a good man, sound and astute, if neither brilliant nor spectacular. He had not since his early days defended criminals. And, in fact, he suggested that someone younger, more dramatic, less averse to publicity and also, although he did not quite say so, less scrupulous, be employed. But, by then, Mrs. Cragg had met him in conference and would not hear of anyone else.

The case was tried, and appealed; the original conviction held. The sentence was pronounced. Nothing more could be done. From the standpoint of the defense Cragg was a damaging witness. He was guilty, and said so.

There was never a question of entering a plea of not guilty, nor would a counsel in his senses plead unsound mind. It is an axiom that all killers are of unsound mind, but many, like Cragg, are not legally insane. Cragg knew right from wrong. The most uninformed layman knew that Maxwell's only hope for his client lay in convincing the jury that premeditation had not existed, that, goaded past endurance by an intolerably loose and venal woman, Cragg had killed her in the heat of passion.

He had not succeeded. Mrs. Cragg absolved him. She said, "You did your best."

Until shortly before tonight, the night upon which Cragg would die, Emily Rome had been involved in his case only through human kindness and her friendship for his mother. But, not long since, she became involved in a way she could not have foreseen.

For Cragg had demanded to see his lawyer and also the warden of the prison in which he was confined. He had, he said, a confession to make.

Tonight, watching the mantel clock, Emily remembered the confession as it had been reported to her, first by telephone and then, in person, by the appalled lawyer, and as it had afterward appeared in the press.

For Cragg had confessed that, prior to the murder of the woman, he had killed Gideon Rome.

They had taken down the confession in his own words and, translated from the pothooks and symbols, it had been something like this:

"I can't die no more than once," he'd said, "and I got to die for killing that woman. I ain't sorry; if anyone had it coming, she had. But that's neither here nor there. You done your best for me, Mr. Maxwell. Mrs. Rome, too, hiring you to defend me, and going to see my mother. She's a good soul, my mother, but cracked on the Bible, and such things. I don't believe in the Bible. When you're dead, you're dead. What little fun you get is here, not up in the sky;

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what hell you have is here, too. I had plenty, too.

"I was often on the Rome place, a hired hand. I often got fired by whatever fellow was in charge. When I did get fired Mrs. Rome would find out and have me hired again.

"Rome was a man I couldn't like. He had a worse temper than me, cold, like a snake. He'd as soon hit you as look at you, if he dared. Not me — I was bigger and younger. If he'd had an extra drink or was pleased with himself about something he'd slip you a tip or a pay raise; next month he'd get sore about nothing and fire you himself.

"You couldn't depend upon him. He hadn't no use for you. He thought he was God Almighty. Acted like he was.

"Rome was nuts on shooting. He had a collection of guns worth a mint of money. He was a good shot; he'd shot all over this country and Europe, too, I guess. His place now, it was stocked. Pheasants, woodcock, and what he called grouse and I call partridge. Plenty of them. No one shot over his place, he thought, but him and his friends.

"And me. It's a big place, I know my way around it; since a kid I've known. And Rome wasn't always there.

"Now, you remember that Rome was killed in a hunting accident, three years ago? They held an inquiry and it was all sewed up slick and easy. He was alone; it was a cold, windy morning, very early. He hadn't got as much as a shot at anything. He came to a rail fence. He was using one of those fancy guns of his.

"He must have checked to see that the gun was on safe, but didn't bother to take out the cartridges. He put the gun over the fence, butt first, so as not to get mud on the barrels. He leaned the muzzle against the post. The way they saw it, they figured the safety brushed against the top rail, got pushed forward, so the gun was ready to shoot.

"Rome climbed the fence, he jarred it some, the muzzle slid away from the rail, the gun started to fall, and something hit the trigger, a twig or a bit of brush; and that washed him up. They said the charge struck him in the right side of the head and killed him instantly.

"It did. I fired it.

"He wasn't alone in the woods that morning. I was there. I thought he was off on a trip. I wasn't working on the place, then; I'd been fired again. By him — a month or so before. Now, I saw him, and it came to me he could help me, not that he'd want to but maybe he could be persuaded. He had a lot of money. He would never miss a thousand or so.

"I came through the woods and into the clearing. I walk light and easy, so he didn't hear me. He had almost come to the fence, when I spoke. He jumped and turned around. He yelled, 'What are you doing here, Cragg?' Then he saw the birds; I had them, in my pocket. He hadn't heard those shots because I didn't fire them

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on his place. It was afterward that I came to the Rome woods.

"So he saw them and began cursing and saying he'd have me in jail. I'd forgotten the damned birds. If I'd remembered I'd have dropped them somewheres. I didn't want to make him sore. So I said I was sorry, though it stuck in my crop. Miserable two birds, what did they mean to him? I said that I was in a mess. I told him how he could help me out and said I would work for him till doomsday to pay it back.

"He laughed his head off at me. So I used the persuader. I said, maybe him and me knew things other folks didn't. Maybe Mrs. Rome would like to know, too. Not that I wanted to tell her — she'd always been decent to me and my folks. In fact, I'd counted on her getting me the job back, only she'd been away.

"This was the persuader: There was a girl, living outside the village. No use naming her — she's just a fool and crazy for nice things. I'd seen Rome going into that house. I kept my trap shut, even when the girl went away suddenly and her father didn't know where. I thought, keep still about it; it might be useful.

"Now I was talking about it, and telling him what I'd seen, and smiling over it. I'd put my gun down. But he had his. I can swear he threatened me with it. He yelled, 'Get off my land and stay off, you blackmailing poacher! Who'll believe your word against mine? I'll see you don't get a job as long as I live.'

"So I took his gun away from him, and I killed him with it.

"I said, it was cold that morning. I had a pair of work gloves in my pocket. I put them on, I wiped off my fingerprints. He was dead, just like they said, instantly. A charge like that does for you, at close range. I thought, it's got to look like an accident. Men get killed climbing fences, if they aren't careful about their guns. I thought it all over before I did anything else. I carried him to the fence and heaved him over. I climbed the fence and fixed him like he'd fallen. I took his hand and made his prints on the gun. I put the gun down, cocked, like it had fallen, too. There was just one shot fired; from the right barrel; my shot. He hadn't no luck that day. *He* hadn't fired the gun.

"I went away. There was blood on my hand. I washed it off in the brook. The blood on my coat, that was from the birds.

"I won't say I wasn't worried when they held the inquiry. But there was nothing to tie me up with Rome's death, or anyone else, for that matter. They never found no one who'd been on Rome's property that morning. I was questioned, like everyone else who'd ever worked for him, especially that had been fired. No one knew I'd gone out that morning. It was barely light when I left; besides, I sleep in the shed I fixed up back of the house. I was in the shed and, as far as you could tell, asleep, with a bottle beside the bed, when my mother came to tell me it was time I got up.

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"Well, as I say, you can't die twice; you don't get the chair twice, no matter what you do. That's for once. And I don't like the Public Prosecutor. I got reason not to. Come election year he might snoop around, trying to stir up a little excitement — I don't know. Well, he won't. I killed Rome, and that's all there is to it."

Emily looked at the clock. The hands were moving, it seemed, very fast. Cragg would die, not for Gideon's death, but for the death of the woman he had killed.

She thought, "Why did he confess?"

Her contact with Cragg had been slight enough. Several times she had talked with him in her little sitting-room at the house, when he had asked her to intercede for him, asking abruptly, even harshly, as if he hated to ask. For the rest, she had seen him only on the village road or on her own place, as she walked in the garden.

She had not seen him since his arrest. Maxwell had reported wryly, "He didn't seem particularly grateful nor impressed with my ability." But Cragg had sent her one message through Maxwell. He said, "Tell her, thanks, though I don't have a Chinaman's chance. But my old lady will be pleased."

Now Emily rose and went quietly to the room in which the children slept. It was cold in there, a winter wind at the windows. She might take them South to her mother's, as she had the past winters since Gideon's death. But Cecily was in school, being seven.

Now that they no longer lived in the apartment Gideon had selected, bought, and furnished, they were very comfortable here.

But always there was the shadow on the sun's bright face, the shadow walking behind her, and the ice at her heart, since Gideon had died.

She looked at her sleeping children; they were handsome, and, in sleep, defenseless. They did not look like their parents nor were they like them. They were gayer than their mother and, unlike their father, even-tempered. They were also candid and, as the doctor to whom she took them periodically said, "normal and adjusted."

Gideon had been neither.

She was deeply in love with him, when they married. She was not, even then, pretty, but fresh and charming, with her own radiance. Gideon was not a tall man nor impressive, yet handsome as the profile on a coin, and as worn, from handling and many transactions. For the first year she had been happy. He did not then drink overmuch, and his rages, always directed against those he considered his inferiors or in no position to retaliate, were infrequent.

It had taken her some time to know what manner of man she had married. And then she had not wanted children any more than he had, if for very different reasons.

The first was, as one says, an acci-

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dent. Gideon had hated her having this child; he abominated the distortions of pregnancy. But once Cecily had been born he had exerted himself to enchant her, and succeeded. As for the boy, he had decided that, after all, they must have a boy, to be named for him, although called by his middle name. So that child had been forced upon her, to be brought up in his father's image. Gideon had said he would bring him up without physical fear, in superb health, and with none of the conventional weaknesses.

By then she knew that weakness, to Gideon, meant self-denial, decency, and consideration for other people; that weakness was believing in good, or, if you prefer, in God.

You fear for your children; the things which might happen, the accident or swift illness — most mothers fear these. And you fear the other illnesses which are not of the body, but those which cripple the spirit, which infect the heart. Many mothers so fear; and some, like Emily, go beyond these and dread the factor of heredity.

But the scientists are divided on this question; one group said, environment; and one, heredity. But what chance has a child when both are evil?

Her children had loved their father with the sweet, unthinking animal love of little people; they knew security with him, for he was stronger than they; and they could easily believe that wisdom matched strength.

But when he had died they were very young; they were four years old, and two.

Emily went back to the living-room. She looked at the clock and away again. She thought of Robert Maxwell. He had tonight, not for the first time, asked her to marry him. He was profoundly in love with her, and she with him. She had not fallen in love with him before Gideon's death, although she had greatly liked him. But she had been too preoccupied by Gideon — not in love, not even in hate, but in despair and terror — to have capacity for other emotions, beyond devotion to her children.

She could be happy with Maxwell; and the children would have the right father, kind and just. Robert Maxwell had married, early in his life; his young wife had died in childbirth, and the child with her. He had not fallen in love again until he came to know Emily, following her husband's death. Prior to that she had simply been a woman married to an old friend, a friend in the sense of long acquaintance and business relationship.

Maxwell was a good man. He was also, she had discovered, a romantic, an idealist. Even the practice of his profession had not clouded his belief in people and their ultimate goodness. And that he loved her with patience, tenderness, and selflessness, as well as ardor, she knew.

Up until a short time ago she had not even considered the possibility of marrying him. He had persisted, al-

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most as if she were a witness for the opposition: "But why? We haven't talked much of Gideon, but I know that, long before he died, you fell out of love with him. And with good reason. So it isn't that, Emily. And I believe you love me and that you would be happy with me. I am as sure of this as of sunrise."

But she had said no, and, again, no. She had said, a little wildly, he could believe what he pleased, still she would not marry him. Only a few months ago, that was. But recently she had wavered in her determination, believing now she might say yes, and surrender to this bitterly contested longing, reaching out toward marriage with Robert Maxwell as the thirsty for water, the hungry for bread, the insomniac for sleep.

The clock hands moved and she fixed her eyes upon them, widening them, because of strain, until they felt tight in her head, and aching. She thought of the night before Gideon's death.

He had been away, on one of his trips; and she had been in the city, returning on the same day. He had seen the children, and then they had dined alone. And after dinner they had gone to the library, and quarreled.

She had spoken to him of the girl, no longer in the village but somewhere in New York. It had been foolish and unwise, perhaps. But she had known about it for some time. Despite Cragg's belief, according to his confession, that only he, of the outsiders, knew, others did; so it had reached Emily. She had been shocked and sickened. Not because Gideon was amusing himself as he often amused himself, for she was accustomed to this. But because of the girl, the very young girl.

He had not defended himself; he almost never did that. He was answerable to no one, he said. Emily could do as she pleased about it. He was tired of her, he had been for some time. Let her leave him; good — that would suit him very well. But the children stayed. He would see to that; he would employ all his resources. With what could she fight? Money? She had none of her own, he had seen to that.

Also, he would bring countersuit. He said, laughing at her, "What about Maxwell? I don't doubt that he'd represent you — for nothing — rather than me for an enormous fee. Or would he?"

That was the beginning. It went on and on for some time. He had entertained himself by going into details about the girl in the village and others. Saying, "But try to prove it!" And always he had reverted to the children, whom he would keep. "I prefer," he said, "to keep you also, mainly because you can't endure me. On occasion, that is quite interesting. But if you prefer, then we'll wash our dirty linen in public. All of it."

After a while she had gone to her room, which was connected with his through her dressing-room and bath. She'd locked the door and gone to

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bed and cried for a long time, something she hadn't done for months.

She slept fitfully, waking very early. Lying there, thinking, she knew that it was impossible for her to leave him. For he would keep the children, by what method she did not know. But that he would keep them was as much a fact as this day's dawn.

She must therefore go on living with him, after some fashion, and perhaps if she tried, putting forth every effort, compromising where she must, her life might not be so intolerable, nor the lives of the children. For, leave them alone with him, she could not, while she lived.

Early in their married life they had been companionable; they danced, golfed, played tennis together; they went to the theater. And each had made concessions. Because of Emily, Gideon had listened to music which displeased him and read books which bored him. Because of Gideon, Emily learned to shoot. He taught her.

Among the many things he gave her when they married was a twenty-gauge shotgun, one of a brace of guns he'd bought in England. They were identical to the fraction of an ounce, the thousandth of an inch.

Emily rose and dressed. She put on a tweed skirt, a flannel shirt, a leather jacket. She put warm gloves in her pocket and went downstairs to the gunroom. No one was about.

In the gunroom, Emily took her gun from the rack; the mate was missing. She had not shot with Gideon for a long time. She thought, as she left the house and went past the gardens to the fields, that this might prove stupidity on her part, wishful thinking. Yet if she found him, if, amicably, they pursued the defenseless bird, if, in companioned silence, they committed their destruction, possibly something of the edge of amity would be restored between them.

Presently she came from the alder run along the brook where the woodcock were, and saw him. He was climbing a rail fence and had pushed his gun over first; it leaned, butt down, against the rail post. She cried, as he reached the ground and turned to pick it up, "Gideon, how careless of you!"

He watched her hurrying toward him; on his side of the fence, and as she came close, she saw he was in no way glad to see her, but in a vile temper. He demanded, "What are you doing here?"

She answered, trying to smile, "I came to be company for you."

He wanted no company but his own, and said so; among other things. He spoke of Maxwell again: "Did you telephone him, wake him out of his sleep to ask his advice, and was this the advice he gave you?"

He looked at her, smiling; a worn and handsome man and an evil one. And he said, "Whether you stay or go, Emily, *I'll have the children* —"

And have them he would; by corruption.

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So she took her gun, which was identical with his, and, there, at very close range, she shot him, and he died.

After he had died she moved, and looked about her. The ground was dry except just by the fence. She had left no mark of her coming. She put on her gloves, slowly, and went near the fence, and reached over and took his gun. She opened it, removed the live cartridge from the right barrel and replaced it with the empty cartridge from her gun. She cocked his gun and pulled the right trigger; the lock clicked.

She handled his gun very carefully. No fingerprints would be on it but his own. She laid it down by the fence, where, to all appearances, it had fallen. She was colder than she had ever been; and sicker. Yet she moved Gideon's body, dragging it, leaving it by the cocked and fallen gun. And then she took her own gun and went quickly, quietly across the fields, and finally into the house.

She had time before the house stirred to take her gun to the gun-room, run a rag through the barrel, and place it in the rack; time to go softly to her room, and remove her clothes and brush them, to brush her shoes, to put them all away; to put on her nightgown and go back to her cold bed, and wait there until the maid knocked at her door to awaken her with her early-morning coffee.

All through the inquiry she had been as a woman moving in a dream, making the right, courteous answers, speaking so quietly that often she must repeat her words. She was stunned, they said, shocked almost beyond endurance.

None knew of her relations with Gideon Rome, not the servants nor the Romes' acquaintances nor Emily's mother. Gideon did not quarrel with nor humiliate her in public. None knew; only Maxwell guessed, and that possibly because he was falling in love with Gideon's wife, even then, although he was not aware of it.

So there was none to testify to that relationship.

The inquiry was closed and over, but still she walked in shadow, never knowing when it might be reopened; a chance word, anything, could effect that. Then Cragg had lifted the shadow from her forever; he had taken her crime upon himself, he had set her free to walk in the sun again.

For she had not been alone with Gideon that morning. There had been a witness in the woods; one who had seen and had heard all that passed between them; who had seen what had happened thereafter, and for some reason — whether his grudging gratitude to her or his sullen dislike of Gideon — had kept his counsel.

Now she would never know what had brought about the confession. Perhaps, during the long months in prison, he had sometimes thought of her because she had voluntarily concerned herself about him, and he had somehow been able to imagine how, for the rest of her life, the shadow would follow her; and he had seen a way in which he could lift that

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shadow; for, as he had stated, no man dies twice.

Now the hands of the clock stood together, were pointed as fingers are when the hands are clasped in prayer. Emily watched them, fearful. How long does it take a man to die?

The hands moved on, and she sat still and wept, for whom she did not know.

After a while the telephone rang, and she went to answer it. And Maxwell said, "I was afraid you would be awake."

"I haven't gone to bed."

He said, "Go now, please, darling, and try to sleep; sleep long and late."

She said, "I want to go to Mrs. Cragg tomorrow. I asked if she wished me with her tonight. But she didn't."

"I am not busy tomorrow," he said. "I could drive you up."

She said faintly, "Very well, Robert."

"On second thought," he said, "perhaps you had best wait until after the burial and all that."

"Perhaps," she said, agreeing. She added, "Somehow you must manage to make her take some money. Not from me. I don't suppose she would. From you, she might."

He said, "All right. . . . Emily, please go to bed now. I love you, darling."

Emily replaced the telephone, turned out the lights, and went to her room. Afterward, lying in bed, she looked beyond the present and far ahead. She was a strong woman although she did not seem so; she was in excellent health. She could live for 40 or 45 years. And, for however many she should live, she would walk neither in shadow, nor, after all, in sun.

No one would ring her doorbell, nor touch her shoulder as she walked; no one would now say, "In the matter of your husband's death, Mrs. Rome." She was free of that; and forever, thanks to the man, Cragg. But she was not free of herself.

She could not receive Maxwell in love, nor any other man. She had no right. And furthermore, loving and loved, the defenses are down — and the barrier. "Suppose I spoke or cried out in my sleep?" she thought, lying there. She might never do so, but there was always the possibility. So, she would sleep alone.

They say, it is necessary not only to forgive others but to forgive yourself. She could not forgive Gideon, nor herself. She need now pay no public debt, as Cragg had paid his, quickly, at the end; she must pay privately and not quickly. Nor could she hasten that conclusion, being committed, by her own hand, to remain with her children as long as they should need her, as long as she should live.

She would pay in the only possible way: a life for a life; the loss of what might have been her personal life, for Gideon's life. And she thought, waiting for morning, that the ancient words were right, they were valid and inexorable, the ancient, inescapable pledge. . . . Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

C. G. Lumbard's "Helpless Victim" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. It is a broodingly and brutally realistic story about a young — very young — G.I. And its implications are terrifying — as you will understand the moment you finish the story.

The author was born in Sacramento and is now 25 years old. His first writing experience occurred when he edited a class newspaper in his sixth grade in public school and published the first installment of a mystery-horror serial; the second installment never appeared — for the simple reason that Mr. Lumbard never wrote it. During high school Mr. Lumbard's writing talent remained dormant, although he tells us that he managed to alienate his English teachers by refusing to compromise regarding style and subject matter — a stubbornness still evident in his first-published story. The author went on to the University of California and eventually majored in journalism and English. During his junior year he became a member of the staff of the California Pelican, and was appointed Editor-in-Chief during his last semester.

After graduation Mr. Lumbard turned briefly to advertising, but he learned that he still wanted to write. He had the enormous courage — inspired and bolstered by his wife's faith in him (she is an assistant psychologist at Mather Air Force Base) — to quit his job and devote full time to writing.

Such is the stuff as dreams are made on . . .

HELPLESS VICTIM

by C. G. LUMBARD

"TREASURE ISLAND," SHOUTED THE conductor, and the F Train began gradually to lose speed. Two sailors rose from their seats in the smoking section of the two-unit train and walked forward to the front section where the conductor would open the doors. The train swayed gently as it came to a stop; the sailors got off and walked along the concrete platform toward a dark flight of stairs.

The train started, and the soldier looked around. He and the red-haired girl were the only ones left in the rear

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unit of the train. It was a quarter to 11 at night, too early for the big rush of people home from San Francisco after an evening of entertainment. The soldier looked at the girl, who sat directly across the aisle from him. Her face was round and full — almost plump — but her clear skin and large, wide-set eyes gave a vacant prettiness to her chubby features. She wore a dark green coat, next to which her hair appeared bright red. As the soldier watched, the girl pushed up her right coat-sleeve and scratched the white skin of her arm just below the elbow. She sighed, pulled the sleeve down, and began ransacking her purse for a cigarette. She had thick lips, the soldier noticed; then, looking down, he saw that her ankles were quite slim. The girl glanced at him and said something.

"What?" said the soldier, looking up.

"Light?" she said in a high-pitched voice. "You gotta match?"

"Yes," said the soldier. He tossed a booklet of matches across the aisle. The matches hit the seat beside the girl and fell to the floor. "Sorry."

The girl retrieved them and, as she bent over, the soldier observed the part in her hair. A synthetic redhead, he decided.

The conductor appeared. "Got your green tag?" he said to the soldier.

"What?"

"Green tag. Supposed to get one at the terminal so I know you didn't just buy a half-price ticket to Treasure Island."

"They didn't tell me," said the soldier. "I thought just sailors went to Treasure Island."

The conductor looked at him. "You're supposed to get one," he said.

"They didn't tell me."

The conductor shrugged. "Better get one next time," he said, and went forward.

The soldier looked out the window and watched a huge truck go past on the other side of the concrete abutment. Trucks and trains used the lower level of the bridge. Passenger cars ran on the upper level where the heavy cables dipped gracefully from tower to tower.

The soldier felt a movement near him and he turned. The red-haired girl had seated herself next to him.

"Thanks," she said. She held the matches out to him.

"Keep them," he said. "I've given up smoking."

"Yeah?" said the girl. "Why'd you do that?"

"I don't know," said the soldier. "I've been wondering myself."

The girl put the matches in her purse and blew a stream of smoke from between her thick lips. The soldier looked at the floor, at the girl's slim ankles. Her feet were resting on the torn page of a newspaper. "*NEW QUEEN FLYING HOME TO ENGLAND*," said the black headlines.

The King is dead, he thought. *And so is the Corporal. They have probably found the Corporal by now. They*

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would have missed his fat, whiskey-reddened face at retreat, and they must have missed me, too.

"You goin' to Berkeley?" said the girl.

"Yes."

"Did you go to college there or somethin'?"

"No. I never went to college. I never learned to read. I was raised in Shangri-La. Nobody reads there; they only count. I can count very well."

"Aw, go on," said the girl. "They wouldn't let you in the army if you couldn't read."

But the Corporal couldn't read, he thought. *The Corporal couldn't read the orders on the bulletin board. "Hey, Private, come here. What're them orders of the day? We got some rifles just love to be cleaned if you ain't read them orders." The Corporal did that because he couldn't read the orders himself.*

The soldier said, "They let me in because I could count so well. A person who can count is more valuable today than one who can read."

"Aw, go on," said the girl.

"I can count to 7,000,000,000 in eight minutes."

"Quit your kiddin'. I bet you went to the university at Berkeley."

"I'm not kidding," said the soldier. "One, two, three, four —" he began.

"Aw, go on," said the girl. "Why you goin' to Berkeley? You got friends there or somethin'?"

"No. That's why I'm going there. It's secret, but I'll tell you anyway. I'm on special duty. I'm going to guard the cyclotron; they only pick men to do it who can count. I'm lucky."

"What!" said the girl. "A little guy like you be guard?" When she smiled, the soldier saw how wide her mouth was, and how even the teeth. "Say, you're just a kid. I'll bet you aren't over eighteen."

"It's an illusion. I'm really 45. It's my past environment. Now that I've left Shangri-La I should age quickly."

"Aw, go on," said the girl. "You don't even have a beard. I'll bet you don't shave, even." She put her hand playfully against the soldier's cheek. The soldier looked at her, his eyes narrowing, and she took her hand away quickly.

He was thinking: *It's just like what the Corporal had said. "Hey, baby-face! Hey, beardless wonder! Away from mama for the first time, are ya? I think we'll just let you dig alone on this latrine trench for a while. It'll toughen you up quick-like. And don't stop movin' that shovel or we'll let you double-time back to the barracks." Maybe they wouldn't find the Corporal until they opened the closet to get the brooms and mops to clean the barracks in the morning. The Corporal had been obsessed with cleaning the barracks. It was poetic justice that he should come to rest among his beloved mops.*

"How old are you?" said the girl. "No kiddin' now."

"I told you," said the soldier. "I'm 45. My beard stopped growing when I was 38."

"You're kinda cute," said the girl.

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"And kinda crazy. No kiddin', are you going to guard that cyclo-thing where they break them atoms up?"

"Yes. I'm going to count the particles."

"I thought they picked big guys for guards."

"They do. Usually they do. But something happened. The contractor who built the cyclotron cheated on the government and only made the guard posts half size."

"Aw, go on!" said the girl.

"Yes. They've been recruiting midgets from all over the country to be guards there."

"Hey, Shorty," the Corporal had said, "you ain't been in step all day. Didn't mama teach you left foot from right foot? Just stand here at attention until after chow, sweetie-pie. If you don't wanna march then you don't wanna eat." I hope the Corporal will still have that magnificent display of surprise on his face when they go for the mops in the morning.

"Aw, you're crazy," said the girl. "But you're kinda cute. Maybe you'd like a drink or somethin'. You goin' some place special?"

"No."

"We could go up to my place for a little while and talk. It's not much of a place, but it's all mine. I got about half a fifth left up there from last Saturday night. Would you like a drink?"

"Yes," said the soldier. "That would be very gracious of you."

"Aw, cut it out," said the girl.

So this was the way it went. This girl with the dyed red hair was just another of the animals in the world, like the Corporal. She is just like the Corporal. They are concerned only with quantity, not quality. To them I am only a helpless victim.

"Mine's the next stop," said the girl. "We better get up to the door." They stood up, and the soldier followed the girl up the swaying aisle.

"Corporals and kings," he said, close behind her. They stopped beside the conductor and the train slowed, grinding.

"You mean the King of England?" said the girl. "I just heard about it before dinner. Ain't it sad, him dyin' like that? But it wasn't so bad, really. He just died in his sleep, real peaceful-like."

"Yes," said the soldier.

"That's the way I want to go," said the girl. "Just like that, in my sleep."

"Oh?" said the soldier. "Is that so? Well, if you're lucky, maybe you will."

The train doors rolled open and they went down the steps, hand in hand.

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BEFORE THE ACT

by THOMAS WALSH

MCCANN WAS SITTING IN HIS TINY office at the end of the hall, smoking an after-supper cigar and reading his New York evening paper, when the clink of a nickel in the coin box of the phone booth just outside his door made him raise his head absently for a moment in order to place the sound. "Five five o," someone said, "that's right"; and McCann, recognizing the voice as Charley Knowles', remembering the number because it was a simple one that stuck in his mind, pushed back in his swivel chair and went on with his paper. Vaguely there came to him Charley Knowles' questioning "Hello?" After that the booth door, sliding shut, diminished the voice to an unintelligible low murmur.

Engrossed with the police news of the New York paper by then, McCann paid no more attention. But fifteen minutes later, after he had, somewhat irritably, failed to recognize a single name in the list of transfers, sick leaves and suspensions in the police orders for the day, he came out of his office and noticed that the phone booth was empty. The big clock over the front door told him that it was five past 7; so he remembered that, too, in the morning, when the time of the phone call became so important.

It meant nothing to him then. In the small barroom to the left of the office he made sure that the ash trays were clean, the glasses stacked and shining, and the first beer tap working all right again. Then he went on through to the side porch to finish his cigar and get a breath of evening air.

Every evening McCann did that, though perhaps out of routine now more than affection; for the quietness there was still too dark, too new, too ominously lonesome for comfort in a man like McCann, who was only three months away from the noisiest city in the world. Nothing broke it; the main road before him, empty of traffic, shone under its glitter of starlight like a ribbon of concrete-white fog, blocked out, compressed, and rolled back over itself, fold on fold, by the pressure of surrounding blackness. There was a light or two far down the road, a mile in toward town; but all about him here, hills and woods stretched unbrokenly away, solemn, black, silent, chilled by an unfriendly March, and spaced here and there by the gaunt dark trunks of naked trees.

Staring at them, McCann put a hand on the back of his neck and rubbed himself rather wistfully. He was a chunky, short man with iron-gray hair and a stolid Irish face — thick-fingered, heavy-shouldered, a

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little puffy at the waist, a little tired-looking, you might think, around the eyes. Once or twice, looking about him with the cigar tilted downward between his teeth, he grunted something that might have been a sigh, if McCann had been the kind of man that had any need for sighs.

In essentials McCann wasn't. The main thing he wanted, the one thing he came out there for, was to feel his mind grow as empty and quiet as the night around him. He had tried it often enough to know that the quietness didn't help — he knew it wouldn't tonight as soon as he stepped out to the porch. Sooner or later, McCann knew, he was going to think of Katie, even though he moved his head now, and tried not to. But McCann could never help himself there because everything, no matter where he turned, reminded him of her.

The sign by the roadside, the way the hedges were planted, the curtains, the brass lamp over the doorway — she was the one who had arranged those things; she was the one who had wanted a place like the Post House all her life. Four months ago, the first time the real-estate agent had shown it to them, she had closed her fingers on his wrist, she had said without words: "This is it, Mike —"

McCann moved his head again and took the cigar out of his mouth. His small gray eyes, round and hard, stared out at the dark hills. Things worked out funny. Who arranged it all? Sometimes McCann wondered. You worked and planned all your life for something you had always wanted; and then when it came, when it worked out at last, there was a little cold neglected in the excitement, a fever, a doctor, a hospital. Pneumonia. That was how it happened, when McCann was 65, and retired on his pension. When the place was theirs, and they were furnishing it, and thinking at last —

The quietness settled in him, but heavily and solidly, like a weight in his breast; and then because he knew Katie wouldn't have wanted him to act this way he shook his shoulders and fought the loneliness by doing the only thing that helped — by walking around to the road and staring up at the squat white bulk of the house, and looking last at the sign that swung forward and back in the night wind.

Post House, that read in script at the top; and underneath: Choice Foods and Liquors. Chicken Dinners — Rooms. Tourists Accommodated. At the bottom, by itself: Michael J. McCann, Prop. When Katie went, they all told him that he was a fool to stay — the kids and all his friends. Maybe, McCann thought, he was. But when he looked up at the sign and the house he knew that this was what she had wanted, exactly as she had wanted it. And he knew, too, that he couldn't let it go. The Post House was what she had left him.

It was all right, Michael J. McCann, Prop., thought; it was all right, wasn't it, Katie? And then, because he felt rather ashamed of himself, he

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cleared his throat violently and strode up the path. He had forgotten the phone call he had heard; he had no hunch about it. And even if he had had one, McCann would only have worried his store teeth, and told you it had nothing to do with him.

For McCann was 65 now, and retired, and through with murder and violence forever. That was the thing, even above the Post House, that Katie had wanted. And that was the one thing, now, he could give her.

The news came to him in the morning, when Herbie the waiter got back from town. Before Herbie had the parcels out of his hand he was giving McCann the story breathlessly; and as soon as he had covered the main points he began it again, more slowly this time, with some embellishment, and a tighter and finer dramatic effect.

They had found the body this morning, Herbie said, as soon as they opened the vault. Young Emmons and Mr. Bradley opened it at 8:15, the way they always did; and when they saw what was inside they stood dumfounded for a minute, and then yelled and damn' near keeled over. Young Emmons went white as a sheet; he couldn't even talk about it at 9:30, when Herbie had seen him.

McCann said it would have been a shock; but Herbie looked at it from the professional standpoint, and said they should have kept their heads, and not touched the body at all. Of course, though, anybody could see how Howard J. Yarnell, the president of the Winston bank, had died, for he must have been in the airproof vault since 4 o'clock yesterday afternoon, the last time it was closed. He was dead as a herring in the morning. And no one thought of it as anything but an accident. Even Herbie, who was always reading detective magazines and pestering McCann for stories of the guys he'd caught when he'd been a cop in New York, had no suspicions. Whoever had been careless enough to lock that vault yesterday without looking inside first, he said, ought to be shot. How anybody could be so dumb passed Herbie's comprehension — McCann's, too, although not so vociferously. McCann had seen a lot of crazy things happen.

And then, at 11 o'clock, Ed Williams came out from town. The chief of Winston's five-man police force was tall and spare and slow-moving, with a pair of sharp dark eyes, and a small, baldly shining head. While McCann was in the kitchen he stopped his car in the driveway and had Herbie show him up to the room Charley Knowles occupied; and when Herbie bustled down, stuttering with news of his visit, McCann went out to the hall and met him at the foot of the stairs.

"Mr. McCann," Ed Williams said gloomily, and nodded his big head. "I guess you heard what happened."

"Yes," McCann said. "It was a

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shame an accident like that —"

"Accident?" Ed Williams repeated. He took his hat off after a moment and rubbed his bald pate with a deliberate palm. "Accident? Well . . . where's Charley Knowles? He been around this morning?"

Even then McCann didn't think of the phone call. Instead, he took out his watch and looked at it, and supposed Charley would be at the bank now.

"Yeaop," Ed Williams said, and turned his hat around on one thumb. "He should be. Only he isn't. Wasn't in this morning, and didn't sleep in his room here last night, far as I can see. And I liked that boy, Mr. McCann — went to school with his father. Will Knowles and me —"

McCann's brows drew slightly together when he stopped. He asked what did Charley Knowles have to do with this?

With a sudden sharp exasperation Ed Williams growled that he wished he knew. "Soundproof," he said, and jabbed out his hat at McCann. "The vault, understand. Yell all you want to in there when it's closed, and no one's going to hear you with the bank full of people. We thought Howie Yarnell had been locked in through carelessness yesterday afternoon when they closed the vault. Only —"

McCann blinked his gray eyes. "Only?"

"We found out," Ed Williams said heavily, "poor Howie wasn't locked in yesterday afternoon at all. He left with the rest when the bank was closed, and had supper at his home last night. Sometime later Charley Knowles called him and asked him to come to the bank — said he had to see him about something important. Howie went down, of course; only he thought it was so queer he mentioned it to his wife. That's how we know.

"Howie never came home. His wife had just called me up this morning, worried sick, when I heard how they'd found him. He got locked in, all right, but it wasn't any accident. Not with that phone call, and Charley Knowles skipping town. Not with damn' near 60,000 cash dollars gone from the currency drawer in the vault — every penny that was in it."

Putting on his hat again, nodding somberly to McCann, Ed Williams started for the door. On the way he added across his shoulder:

"I guess you know how these things go as well as I do. Better, maybe. Sometimes I wish I was retired too. I'd quit now if Will Knowles wasn't cold in his grave. If he knew the only boy he ever had —"

He sighed, waved to McCann, got in his car and drove off. McCann stared after him, chewing on his cigar. It wasn't hard to straighten out, if it was difficult to believe at first. Everything was there — motive, opportunity, flight. Everything contributed to the inevitable sum and total. Only a clean, fresh-faced boy like Charley Knowles doing

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anything like this — a boy who had boarded at the Post House ever since McCann had opened it, who had joked with him and drunk beer with him and listened to his stories through long winter evenings in the little barroom inside. It was so incredible that McCann growled in his throat at it.

But after a moment he threw away his cigar angrily and called himself a fool. After 35 years on what McCann was quietly positive was the best police force in the world he swore at himself for forgetting that the pattern was never one you could pick out beforehand, not even — or especially, perhaps — when you knew the things McCann did.

He could recall a thousand proofs — one or two of them popped into his mind now: A pretty, darkhaired woman who had poisoned her little girl for $500 insurance: Irish, too — Mrs. Shanahan. A fat and very jolly little man who could have doubled for a movie comedian until McCann had sent him to the chair. Others, too — so many others that McCann knew only one thing about murder; no one was ever incapable of it, no matter how he looked, or how much you liked him. In McCann's work you learned that fact fast, or you looked for another job.

Going back to his little office, shaking his head, he poured himself a small nip of Irish whiskey to get all those things he did not want to think of out of his mind. He had just downed it and put the bottle back in the drawer when Herbie appeared in the doorway and said: "Mr. McCann —"

But the girl behind him would not wait; she pushed in through the door at his back. Before he could say anything, even before he could turn to face her, she was speaking swiftly.

"I'm Katherine Wilson," she said in a breathless voice. "You might have heard Charley mention me — we're going to be married in June. And I've come to see you, Mr. McCann, because I want you to help us. Because you're the only one who can."

McCann got her into a chair. His square, ruddy face was troubled and uneasy; for a moment he could think of nothing to say but: "Well, now, well —"

She put her right hand across the desk and touched his wrist. In the tenseness of her fingers he could feel the effort she was making to smile at him.

"Charley talked of you so much! He used to tell me the stories you told him — the things that happened to you when you were a detective in New York, before you came here. He said you were the smartest — that's why I thought of you, Mr. McCann, as soon as I heard them saying that Charley killed Mr. Yarnell and stole the money. That isn't true. It couldn't be. Charley never — never, Mr. McCann —"

She shook her head at him in a movement of inarticulate vehemence.

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Across the desk McCann turned a pencil around in his stubby fingers and muttered, a little uncomfortably, that there wasn't anything he could do. If there was —

"I'll pay you," Katherine Wilson said. "Mr. McCann —" She opened her purse and took some bills out. "There are $200; I can get more, however much you think is fair. Whatever you say, Mr. McCann."

Trying to be logical with her, and gentle, McCann told her again that there was nothing he could do. A good lawyer — he heard her breathe then, and raised his eyes from the pencil. As soon as he did she asked him in a clear, scornful voice: "Do you think the same as the others do? Do you think Charley killed him?"

McCann muttered that wasn't so. He was just trying to show her —

"But you do," she said in a softly incredulous voice, as if that fact was something she had not considered before. "That's why. Of course you do." Gathering the bills together in her hand, she got to her feet. She said: "I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mr. McCann."

Then she crossed to the door, and McCann began to feel rather angry with something or someone — with himself, or with her. "Wait a minute," he said, as she touched the knob. "Wait a minute now."

He knew he should have let her go on out. . . . But he knew what Katie would have wanted him to do if she were there.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

Half an hour later, he walked into the office of the Winston Trust Company with Katherine Wilson, and suggested mildly to Ed Williams that he'd like to see the vault, if there were no objections. The chief gave him one glance from his sharp eyes, and after a moment shrugged. "Emmons," he called, and waved an arm. A teller came over. "Mr. McCann would like to see where it happened. Show him, will you?"

The tone of his voice was warning, and scarcely pleasant. No nosing around, it said; no butting in. But McCann said: "Thanks," and followed young Emmons across to the vault.

It was a small one, scarcely larger than a closet — eight feet long by perhaps four wide. The teller showed him the cabinets inside the solid steel walls, the drawers where the currency was deposited each evening, and the time lock controlling the door, visible through a glass pane that covered the inner half of the three-foot-thick steel portal.

"Every night," he told McCann, "two of us close it up — usually a teller and an officer."

"Uh huh," McCann said, and nodded slowly. "Who locked it yesterday afternoon?"

Young Emmons' eyes flickered uneasily toward the girl. "Well — Charley Knowles helped Mr. Yarnell yesterday with it. Not that it's much of a job. Just —" Unlocking the glass shield on the inside of the door, he forced up a metal trip under a

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dial in the mechanism. "That sets the time lock. Once it's on, and the door closed, no one can open it before 8:15 in the morning, even if they know the combination."

McCann fiddled with the trip for no reason. "If it was on, how could anybody open it last night, when Mr. Yarnell came down after supper?"

The girl's presence was making young Emmons acutely uncomfortable. He stuttered a bit in his answer:

"It couldn't have been on. Chief Williams said that — well, Mr. Yarnell must have thought the trip was up when it wasn't. He said that Char — that somebody must have pressed it up yesterday afternoon, clocking it so Mr. Yarnell heard the snap and figured the time lock was all set. Only it could have been pressed down again, if Mr. Yarnell didn't pay too close attention. If you hold back the catch and let it down easy it drops back without making any noise."

He demonstrated it once or twice, and McCann watched him closely. When young Emmons held the catch back and let it in only when the trip was down it slid in gently and soundlessly. McCann didn't ask too many questions because of the girl — he didn't have to, actually. Ed Williams had put his finger on the one way the thing could have been done.

Howard Yarnell and Charley Knowles had locked the vault yesterday. And Charley Knowles had pressed up the trip that controlled the time lock while the president watched him — and then, one way or another, he had got Howard Yarnell to look away for a moment. Not long, but long enough. He had pressed down the trip silently, disengaging the time lock, and started the door swinging shut before Mr. Yarnell had had a chance to notice. Credible enough — McCann couldn't see any other way around the facts.

He asked young Emmons: "When the vault door's closed, isn't there any way to tell from the outside whether the time lock is on or not?"

"No. Not unless you try the combination; when the time lock is on, even that won't open it of course. And if it isn't, of course the vault opens. But if Mr. Yarnell thought he saw the time lock set, he wouldn't bother doing that. Charley had been working here so long —"

"Uh, huh," McCann repeated, and indicated the combination dial on the outside of the vault door with a nod. "Any fingerprints on that?"

"No. Chief Williams said whoever touched it last wiped it clean with something afterward."

There was nothing to ask after that. McCann saw no openings. And then suddenly he remembered the call he had heard Charley Knowles make from the Post House last night. It brought his head up quickly.

"Five five o," he asked young Emmons. "You know whose phone number that is?"

"Why — Mr. Yarnell's home number."

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That finished it. Charley Knowles had left the time lock off; he had called up the president that night, got him down to the bank, forced the combination out of him some way, and taken the money and locked him in. McCann saw it all clearly.

In an open space behind the tellers' cages Ed Williams was talking to a sturdy little woman with iron-gray hair, hatless, and poorly dressed. McCann went over and waited just within earshot, behind the desk of a dark-haired girl whose petulantly pretty face was marked by the traces of tears. Marian Connor, young Emmons told him her name was — Mr. Yarnell's secretary.

The little woman's name was Mrs. Costigan. She was telling Ed Williams that she had come down to the bank last night at a little after 9, because her boy had been sick and she'd stayed with him until he'd gone to sleep. Usually she came down to do the cleaning at 7, but last night she'd been a little late. The janitor had let her in; the bank was empty, as usual. Mr. Yarnell's car had been in the alley out back, and she thought he had parked it there to go to the movies around the corner. He often did.

Then Ed Williams saw McCann, and sent her off with a wave of his hand. Settling into her seat, McCann hoped he wasn't a nuisance.

"I'm not sure yet," Ed Williams said, and looked him levelly in the eyes. "Maybe we got a small town here, and maybe we're not as scientific as we could be about things. But we don't want any help until we ask for it, and we haven't asked yet. Not even for city help, Mr. McCann. If you don't forget that we'll get on all —"

He broke off sharply there, to stare openmouthed at something behind McCann. In a moment he jumped to his feet and ran around the desk, and McCann twisted his neck to see who it was.

Charley Knowles had pushed in through the low gate from the lobby and was crossing to them, a tired-looking young man with thick red hair and worried blue eyes.

"I just heard about Mr. Yarnell," he said. "So I came down here without even cleaning up, as soon as I got in."

Taking his arm, Ed Williams pushed him around the desk to a chair opposite McCann. He said harshly as soon as he was seated: "You didn't sleep in your room last night. So far as we could find out, you weren't anywhere around town. Where were you?"

"Concord," Charley Knowles answered, frowning slightly at him. "I drove over to get some tires at the auto store there. Only it was closed when I arrived, so I didn't get them."

"Concord! Twenty miles. It took you all night to drive there and back?"

The only thing McCann could see on Charley Knowles' face was a puzzled surprise.

"It did because I got picked up for speeding on the way back, in Leba-

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non. I didn't have $25 collateral on me and they wouldn't take a check. So I got locked up till 11 this morning, when court opened. They fined me $10 and costs and I just had enough to cover that."

"Good," Ed Williams said. "Good, by Godfrey!" He put his hands on the desk and thrust his shoulders forward above them. "But did you think it was going to be good enough, boy?"

"For what?" Charley Knowles looked at McCann. "What is he talking about, Mac?"

"I'll tell you," Ed Williams said quietly. "Murder, boy. We've got everything we need. We know how you closed the vault yesterday and made Howie think the time lock was on when it wasn't. You were the only one who could have done that because you were the only one there with Howie when the vault was closed. We know that you called him up last night after supper and got him down here to open the vault for you, because he knew the combination and you didn't.

"I guess you did drive over to Lebanon afterward. Everybody around knows their constable works on a fee basis, and arrests anyone who goes two miles over the limit. You banked on that for an alibi — you could race through Lebanon three or four times until he saw you and picked you up. And how could you kill a man when they had you in jail?"

"How could he?" McCann said.

Ed Williams ignored him. He asked Charley Knowles: "What time did they pick you up?"

"Nine-thirty," Charley Knowles said angrily. "And what are you —"

"Nine-thirty," Ed Williams repeated. "Mrs. Costigan saw Howie's car in the alley last night at 9 o'clock, when she got here. So he was locked in the vault then, although she didn't know it. He might have been yelling for help, but she couldn't hear him. It's soundproof. She was two hours late because her boy was sick, and she sets the time. No later than nine. She'll convict you, boy — she and the phone call you made to Howie. Or will you deny that too?"

"No," Charley Knowles said. "I called him because he asked me to, yesterday afternoon. He said he had something to see me about after supper. Something important. When I called he wanted me to meet him here at 9:30. And I was hurrying back because I was a few minutes late already when they stopped me in Lebanon."

"You figured it out fine," Ed Williams said. "Mrs. Costigan should have been through here and gone by the time you came. But the way it is, you're done; you'll come with me, boy."

McCann asked no questions; he avoided Katherine Wilson's eyes when he felt them upon him. He just got up with the others and followed them out to the street, watching them walk off from there to the town building; and afterward, because there was nothing else to do, he wandered aimlessly

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around town, keeping his ears open.

Some of the things that he overheard attracted him, but nothing conclusive developed.

McCann went back to the Post House in a bad humor, deciding rather fretfully that he'd been a fool ever to get mixed up in this.

After supper he sat on the side porch of the Post House, staring out at the dark hills. Then he went in to the phone booth in the hall and called up Katherine Wilson.

Half an hour later he was in at the town building, starting from the Post House as soon as Katherine Wilson phoned him back. Ed Williams didn't like the idea at all, principally, McCann supposed, because he didn't like him. At first he said he'd be damned if he would, and then when McCann mentioned Charley Knowles' father he twisted his mouth sideways, stared an instant at the desk top, and at last got up without a word.

Katherine Wilson was waiting for them outside the bank, bundled up in a heavy coat against the March wind, and carrying a traveling bag in her hand. The three of them stood in the doorway until Marian Connor, the doll-faced secretary, came down the street; then Ed Williams rang for the janitor who lived upstairs over the bank, and they all went in.

Marian Connor's eyes were dark and hard, shiny, defiant, not quite tearful; she fixed them on McCann as if he were the only one there. In a small private office to the left of the tellers' cages McCann sat down, and after a moment the two girls sat down beside him. Ed Williams alone remained standing, breathing puffily, and frowning.

Nine o'clock struck from the town hall; at the empty strokes McCann felt a shiver light as air run through his body. He was annoyed with it, and he asked Ed Williams testily: "You sure that janitor will keep his mouth shut when he lets Mrs. Costigan in?"

Ed Williams swore by the seven fallen angels that he'd better.

"Not," he added, twisting his head to look at McCann, "that I think this damn' fool stunt will do any good. If it wasn't Billy Knowles' boy —"

"I know," McCann said. "I just thought we'd try. It won't take long."

"You got one thing," Ed Williams said, tapping it out with a forefinger on the surface of the desk. "One thing to get over — who fooled with the time lock if Charley Knowles didn't? Who was near enough to touch the vault besides him? Nobody but Howie Yarnell. You going to try to tell me he left the time lock off so he could come back later and lock himself in?"

"No," McCann said, and shook his head. "A crazy man might do that, but Howie Yarnell wasn't a crazy man. He was just 45 years old. He made 6 or 7,000 a year and spent most of that running the big house

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he lived in. I guess he had less ready cash than some of his tellers. And 45 is an age where a man can get desperate in a fix like that."

Ed Williams looked out to the street. "Not yet," he said. "So what, McCann?"

"You said if Charley didn't fix the time lock, no one but Howie Yarnell could have touched it. I think he did. It would be simpler for him to fool Charley Knowles than for Charley to fool him. I think after Charley set it he reached in as if to make sure, and pressed the trip down and closed the door. Charley wouldn't question him. He was the boss.

"So I figured Charley might be telling the truth when he told us today that Howie Yarnell asked him to phone. I had something to back that up. Charley, if he was smart enough to figure out anything like this, wouldn't be dumb enough to call him from the phone booth outside my office, where he knew I could hear him give the number."

"You heard him?" Ed Williams barked angrily. "You mean you heard him make that call and never told me about it?"

McCann said quietly: "I'm not a cop any longer. You didn't ask me, besides." Then he turned his head to Marian Connor. He said: "I wasn't kidding you about that money when I called you tonight. It's in that bag. The one Miss Wilson has."

There was a long silence broken only by Ed Williams' sultry breathing. After it, McCann said:

"If Yarnell was robbing his own bank, he had to have a fall guy. Charley Knowles was it, because he was the only one besides Yarnell who could have touched the time lock. Suppose the bank was robbed and Charley and Yarnell both disappeared — wouldn't everybody have thought just the things they did think, that Charley took the money and knocked Yarnell off? Don't forget the phone call Yarnell asked Charley to make, because that was the tip-off. Yarnell told his wife about it to make sure it would come out. That would start things going the way Yarnell wanted them to go.

"They wouldn't find Yarnell's body. They couldn't. It wouldn't be anywhere around. But Charley's would — in some place where it would never be found unless by a freak. In a grave in the woods maybe — or loaded down with rocks at the bottom of a lake. And Yarnell would be somewhere safe, with no one looking for him, everybody thinking him dead. In six months or so his girl friend would meet him; he'd have a girl friend because he always had had one, I found out. Miss Connor seemed to fit and I think it's her."

The doll-faced secretary said in a steady voice: "He was always a gentleman to me. He never —"

McCann said: "Where was he going to meet you, after he'd taken the money and murdered Charley Knowles?"

"No —" Her steady voice struggled with shrillness, as if she couldn't

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quite convince herself. "He wouldn't have done that. It's a lie. And I loved him and he loved me, no matter what you think. Poor Howie!"

"Where were you going to meet him?" McCann repeated patiently.

Her eyes hated him, but the silence was the thing she couldn't endure. Whispering, her voice husky and dull, she broke it at last:

"In Los Angeles. In September. But I loved him — I did, I did, I did! And he wouldn't have killed Charley. He never told me he was going to do that."

"Maybe he didn't," McCann said, "But it was his only out if he wanted to be safe. That way the police would be looking for Charley, not for him. He'd be dead, or everyone would think him dead; after Charley's phone call came out the only thing to figure would be that Charley took the money, killed him, and hid his body. The cleaning woman, Mrs. Costigan, got down here usually about seven and was through in an hour, so Yarnell came down at half-past eight about when he thought she'd be done and nobody else around. He came in with his own key, opened the vault, and cleaned it out. He put the money in his car. Then he came back to wait for Charley."

Ed Williams looked up from the traveling bag in his lap.

"It's the money," he said. "Where was it?"

"In the trunk of his car," McCann said. "Where he'd parked it while he waited for Charley to come. I told Miss Wilson to go out to his garage and look for it there. It was the only place it would be if I was right."

Katherine Wilson nodded in the gloom. "Yes. His keys were in the ignition and I opened the trunk with them and found it where Mr. McCann said it would be."

"Where I hoped it would be," McCann put in, "if I wasn't crazy, and if Charley Knowles was telling the truth. If the phone call had a reason, it was Yarnell's reason, not Charley's. That's the thing started me. So Charley was the fall guy, only after Yarnell had the money cleaned out and safe in his car, it wasn't Charley who came in here. It was Mrs. Costigan, late because her little boy was sick.

"If she saw him everything was spoiled. He had to hide. Even then he was smart enough to hide in the perfect place — in the vault, where she'd never look. He stepped in and pulled the door tight shut after him. But it wasn't locked. It —"

Ed Williams' head came up with a jerk. He snapped off the lights in the office. They heard a key grate in a lock, and then the hoarse mutter of the janitor's voice: "Cold night." They heard Mrs. Costigan agree. Then the lights came up in the bank outside the little office, and Mrs. Costigan came in.

She swept the floor and emptied the wastepaper baskets; then she took her rag and dusted around. When everything else was dusted, she went over to the vault and wiped

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all the shiny parts, the hinges and the combination dial, and the shiny knob in the center that worked the lock.

She did that every night — last night, too. Last night, McCann thought, it might have clicked at first and puzzled her; but if she tried it again the knob would work smoothly, and without any catch at all. She'd have thought she imagined it.

McCann looked at Ed Williams then, but he knew as soon as he saw his face he didn't have to explain any more. The chief's eyes were sick; he shivered suddenly.

McCann felt that way too. He could picture Howard Yarnell waiting ten minutes, twenty, 30, to make sure Mrs. Costigan would be through and gone. And then Yarnell pushing the vault door — pushing harder, sweating a bit, thinking: "What's this? What's —"

He couldn't have heard her spinning the knob with her cleaning rag in the action that locked him in. The vault was soundproof. Airproof, too. Yarnell would have known that at once, and he'd have known too that screaming wasn't any good. . . .

Putting a match to his cigar with fingers that trembled a bit, McCann tried not to think too much of the rest of it, he tried only to think of Katherine Wilson, and another Katie who would have liked this thing he had done. Then Ed Williams said something in a low voice, and shook himself, and got up; and McCann went out with him to meet Mrs. Costigan, whose little boy was sick, and who had been two hours late last night. And again tonight.

The two girls stayed in the office; McCann heard one of them sobbing. But he didn't look back because he knew which one it was, and that there was nothing he could do for her.

NEXT MONTH . . .

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Dorothy Salisbury Davis's BORN KILLER

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Nero Wolfe finds himself in the clean-up spot

THE WORLD SERIES MURDER

by REX STOUT

AT THE END OF THE SIXTH INNING the score was Boston 11, New York 1. I would not have believed that the day would ever come when, seated in a lower box between home and first, at the seventh and deciding game of a World Series between New York and Boston, I would find myself glomming a girl. I am by no means above glomming a girl if she is worthy, but not at a ball game, where my mind is otherwise occupied. That awful day, though, I did.

The situation was complex and will have to be explained. It was a mess even before the game started. Pierre Mondor, owner of a famous restaurant in Paris, was visiting New York and was our house guest at Nero Wolfe's old brownstone on West 35th Street. He got the notion, somehow, that Wolfe had to take him to a baseball game, and Wolfe as his host couldn't refuse. Tickets were no problem, since Emil Chisholm, oil millionaire and part owner of the New York team, considered himself deeply in Wolfe's debt on account of a case we had handled for him a few years back.

So that October afternoon, a Wednesday, I got the pair of them — the noted private detective and the noted chef — up to the ball park. It was twenty past 1, only ten minutes to game time, and the stands were jammed. I motioned to Mondor, and he slid in and sat. Wolfe stood and glared down at the wooden slats and metal arms. Then he glared at me.

"Are you out of your senses?" he demanded.

"I warned you," I said coldly. "It was designed for men, not mammoths."

He tightened his lips, moved his bulk, lowered it, and tried to squeeze between the arms. No. He grasped the rail in front with both hands, wriggled loose, and perched on the edge of the seat.

Mondor called to me across the great expanse of Wolfe's back: "I depend with confidence on you, Arshee! You must make clear as it develops! What are the little white things?"

I love baseball, I love the New York team, I had 50 bucks up on that game, but I would have got up and gone but for one thing: It was working hours and Wolfe pays my salary, and there were too many people, some of them alive and loose, who felt strongly that he had already lived too long. He is seldom out in the open, easy to get at, and when he is I like to be nearby. So I gritted my teeth and stuck.

The ground crew finished smoothing off and hauled their drags away;

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the umpires did a huddle, the home team trotted out on the field to their stations; the throng gave with a lusty, excited roar; we all stood up for *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and then sat down again. After southpaw Ed Romeike, 22–4 for the season, had burned a few over for the range, Lew Baker, the catcher, fired it to Tiny Garth at second. The Boston lead-off man came to the white line, the plate umpire said go, and Romeike looked around at the field, toed the rubber, went into his tricky windup, and shot a fast one over the outside corner for strike one. The crowd let out a short, sharp yell.

My personal nightmare was bad enough. Mondor was our guest, and trying to tell a foreigner what a base on balls is during a World Series game, with two men on, two down, and Oaky Asmussen at bat, is hard on the nerves. As for Wolfe, it wasn't so much the sight of him there in his concentrated misery; it was the certainty that by tomorrow he would have figured out a way to blame it on me, and that would start a feud.

Bad enough, but more was to come, and not for me alone. One fly had plopped into the soup even before the game started, when the line-up was announced and Tiny Garth was named for second base, with no explanation. A buzz of amazement had filled the stands. Why not Nick Ferrone? Ferrone, a lanky, big-eared kid just up from the bush five months back, had fielded and batted himself so far to the front that it was taken for granted he would be voted rookie of the year. He had been spectacular in the first six games of the Series, batting .427. Where was he today? Why Garth?

Then the game. That was no personal nightmare of mine; it was all too public. In the first inning Con Prentiss, New York's shortstop, bobbled an easy grounder, and two minutes later Lew Baker, the catcher, trying to nab a runner at second, threw the ball six feet over Garth's head into the outfield. With luck the visitors scored only one run. In the second inning Nat Neill, center fielder, misjudged a fly he could have walked under, tried to run in three directions at once, and had to chase it to the fence; and soon after that, Prentiss grabbed a hard-hit ball on the hop and hurled it into the dirt three paces to the left of third base. By the time they got three out, Boston had two more runs.

As the New York team came in for their turn at bat in the second, bitter sarcasms from the stands greeted them. Then our section was distracted by an incident. A man in a hurry came plunging down the aisle, bumping my elbow as he passed, and pulled up alongside a front box occupied by six men, among them the Mayor of New York and oilman Emil Chisholm, who had provided our tickets. The man spoke into the ear of Chisholm, who looked anything but happy. Chisholm said something to his boxmates, arose, and beat it up the aisle double-quick, followed by cutting remarks from nearby fans who had recognized him.

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As my eyes went back to the arena, Con Prentiss, New York shortstop, swung at a floater and missed by a mile.

There is no point in my retailing the agony. As I said, at the end of the sixth the score was 11 to 1. Romeike was hurling all right, but his support would have been pitiful on a sand lot. Joe Eston, the third baseman, and Nat Neill had each made two errors, and Con Prentiss and Lew Baker three apiece. As they came to the dugout in the sixth one wit yelled, "Say it ain't true, Joe!" at Eston, and the crowd, recognizing that classic moan to Shoeless Joe Jackson, let out a howl. They were getting really rough. As for me, I had had plenty of the tragedy out on the diamond and was looking around for something less painful, when I caught sight of the girl, in a box off to my right.

I glommed her, not offensively. There were two of them. One was a redhead who would start to get plump in a couple of years; almost worthy, but not quite. The other one, the glommee, had light-brown hair and dark-brown eyes, and was fully qualified. I had the feeling that she was not a complete stranger, that I had seen her somewhere before, but couldn't place her.

The pleasure it gave me to look at her was not pure, because it was adulterated with resentment. She looked happy. Her eyes sparkled. Apparently she liked the way things were going. There is no law barring enemy fans from a ball park, but I resented it. Nevertheless, I continued the glommation. She was the only object I had seen there that day, on or off the field, that didn't make me want to shut my eyes.

Something came between her and me. A man stopped at my elbow, and asked my ear: "Are you Archie Goodwin?"

I told him yes.

"Is that Nero Wolfe?"

I nodded.

"Mr. Chisholm wants him in the clubhouse, quick."

I reflected for two seconds, decided that this was straight from heaven, and slid forward to tell Wolfe: "Mr. Chisholm invites us to the clubhouse. We'll avoid the crush. There's a chair there. He wants to see you."

He didn't growl, "What about?" He didn't even growl. He muttered something to Mondor, pulled himself erect, and side-stepped past me to the aisle. Mondor came after him. The courier led the way and I brought up the rear. As we went up the concrete steps single file a shout came from somewhere on the left:

"Go get 'em, Nero! Sic 'em!"

Such is fame. . . .

"This is urgent!" Emil Chisholm squeaked. "It's urgent!"

There was no chair in the clubroom of the size Wolfe likes and needs, but there was a big leather couch, and he was on it, breathing hard and scowling. Mondor was seated over against the wall, out of it. Chisholm, a hefty, broad-shouldered guy, with a wide, thick mouth and a long, straight nose,

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was too upset to stand or sit, so he was boiling around. I was standing near an open window. Through it came a sudden swelling roar from the crowd out in the stands.

"Shut that window!" Chisholm barked.

I did so.

"I'm going home," Wolfe stated in his most conclusive tone. "But not until they have left. Perhaps, if you will tell me briefly —"

"We've lost the Series!" Chisholm shouted.

Wolfe closed his eyes, and opened them again. "If you'll keep your voice down," he suggested. "I've had enough noise today. If losing the Series is your problem, I'm afraid I can't help."

"No. Nobody can." Chisholm stood facing him. "I blew up. I'm sorry. I've got to get hold of myself. This is what happened: Out there before the game Art got a suspicion —"

"Art?"

"Art Kinney, our manager. Naturally, he was watching the boys like a hawk, and he got a suspicion something was wrong. That first —"

"Why was he watching them like a hawk?"

"That's his job! He's manager!" Chisholm realized he was shouting again, stopped, clamped his jaw, and clenched his fists. After a second he went on: "Also, Nick Ferrone has disappeared. He was here with them in the clubhouse, he had got into uniform; then, after they went out to the dugout, he just wasn't there. Art sent Doc Soffer back here to get him, but he couldn't find him. He was simply gone. Art had to put Garth at second base. Naturally, he was on edge, and he noticed things — the way some of the boys looked and acted — that made him suspicious. Then —"

A door opened and a guy came running in, yelling, "Fitch hit one and Neill let it get by, and Asmussen scored! Fitch went on to third!"

I recognized him, chiefly by his crooked nose, which had got in the way of a line drive back in the twenties, when he was a star infielder. It was Beaky Durkin, now a New York scout, with a new lease on life because he had dug up Nick Ferrone out in Arkansas.

Chisholm yelled at him, "Get out!" He took a threatening step. "Get out! . . . Hey, Doc! Come in here!"

Durkin, backing out, collided with a man in the doorway. This was Doc Soffer, New York's veteran medico, bald, wearing black-rimmed glasses; he had a long torso and short legs. Entering, he looked as if his ten best-paying patients had just died on him.

"I can't sweat it, Doc," Chisholm told him. "I'm going nuts! This is Nero Wolfe. You tell him."

"Who are you?" Wolfe demanded.

Soffer stopped before him. "I'm Dr. Horton Soffer," he said, clipping it. "Four of my men have been drugged. They're out there now, trying to play ball, and they can't." He stopped, looking as if he were about to break down and cry, gulped, and went on:

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"They didn't seem right, there in the dugout. I noticed it and so did Kinney. That first inning there was no doubt about it, something was wrong. The second inning it was even worse — and the same four men, Baker, Prentiss, Neill, and Eston. I got an idea, and came here to investigate. You see that cooler?"

He pointed to a big, white-enameled refrigerator standing against a wall.

Wolfe nodded. "Well?"

"It contains mostly an assortment of drinks in bottles. I know my men's habits, every little habit they've got and every big one, too. I know that after they get into uniform before a game those four men — the four I named — have the habit of getting a bottle of Beebright out of the cooler."

"What is Beebright?"

"It's a carbonated drink that's supposed to have honey in it instead of sugar. Each of those four men drinks a bottle of it, or part of one, before he goes out to the field, practically without exception. And it was those four that were off — terrible! I never saw anything like it. That's how I got my idea. I told Kinney, and he said to come and see.

"Usually the clubhouse boy cleans up here after the men leave for the field, but this being the deciding game of the World Series, today he didn't. Stuff was scattered around — as you see, it still is — and there was a Beebright bottle there on that table with a little left in it. It didn't smell wrong, and I didn't want to waste any tasting it. I had sent for Mr. Chisholm, and when he came we decided what to do. He sent for Beaky Durkin, who had a seat in the grandstand, because he knew Ferrone better than anyone else. We thought he might have some idea that would help explain what had happened to Ferrone and those four other boys. I took the Beebright down the street to a drugstore, and made two tests. The first one, Ranwez's, didn't prove anything, but that was probably because it is limited —"

"Negatives may be skipped," Wolfe muttered.

"I'm telling you what I did," Soffer snapped. "Ranwez's test took over half an hour. The second, Ekkert's, took less. I did it twice, to check. It was conclusive. The Beebright contained sodium phenobarbital. I couldn't get the quantity, in a hurry like that, but on a guess it was two grains, possibly a little more, in the full bottle. Anyone can get hold of it. Certainly that would be no problem for a big-time gambler who wanted to clean up on a World Series game."

Chisholm swore, audibly and at length.

Doc Soffer nodded. "And somebody put it in the bottles, knowing those four men would drink it just before the game. All he had to do was remove the caps, drop the tablets in, replace the caps, and shake the bottles a little — not much, because it's very soluble. They must have been placed in the refrigerator not much before noon; otherwise someone else might have drunk them. Besides, if they

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were fixed very far in advance, the drinks would have gone stale and the men would have noticed it. So it must have been someone —"

Chisholm had marched to the window. He whirled and yelled, "Ferrone did it! He did it and lammed!"

Doc Soffer said, "I don't know about that, but I've got to tell Art —" He almost ran from the room.

Beaky Durkin appeared again. He came through the door and halted, facing Chisholm. He was trembling and his face was white, all but the crooked nose.

"Not Nick," he said hoarsely. "Not that boy. Nick didn't do it!"

"Oh, no?" Chisholm was bitter. "Did I ask you? A fine rookie of the year you brought in from Arkansas! Where is he? Bring him here and let me get my hands on him! Go find him!"

Beaky looked bewildered. "Go where?"

"How do I know? He's your pet, not mine," Chisholm said savagely. "Get him and bring him in and I'll offer him a new contract — that will *be* a contract. Now beat it!"

Durkin lifted helpless hands, but turned and left the room.

Wolfe grunted. "Sit down, please," he told Chisholm. "When I address you I want to look at you, and my neck is not elastic. . . . Thank you, sir. You want to hire me for a job?"

"Yes. I want —"

"Please. Is this correct? Four of your best players, drugged as described by Dr. Soffer, could not perform properly, and as a result a game is lost and a World Series?"

"We're losing it." Chisholm's head swung toward the window and back again. "Art's pulling out the drugged men, but of course it's lost."

"And you assume a gambler or a group of gamblers is responsible. How much could he or they win on a game?"

"On today's game, any amount. Fifty thousand, or double that, easy."

"I see. Then you need the police. At once."

Chisholm shook his head. "I don't want to. Baseball is a wonderful game, the best and cleanest game on earth. This is the dirtiest thing that's happened in baseball in 30 years, and it's got to be handled right and handled fast. You're the best detective in the business, and you're right here. With a swarm of cops trooping in, who knows what'll happen! If we have to have them later, all right, but now you're here. Go to it!"

Wolfe was frowning. "You think this Nick Ferrone did it."

"I don't know!" Chisholm was yelling again. "How do I know what I think? He's a harebrained kid just out of the sticks, and he's disappeared. What does that look like?"

Wolfe nodded. "Very well." He drew a deep sigh. "I can at least make some gestures, and see." He aimed a finger at the door Beaky Durkin and Doc Soffer had used. "Is that an office?"

"It leads to Kinney's office — the manager's."

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"Then it has a phone. You will call police headquarters and report the disappearance of Nick Ferrone, and ask them to find him. Such a job, when urgent, is beyond my resources. Tell them nothing more for the present if you want it that way. Where do the players change clothing?"

"Through there." Chisholm indicated another door. "That's the locker room. The shower room is beyond."

Wolfe's eyes came to me: "Archie. You will look around all premises adjoining this room. This room you can leave to me."

"Anything in particular?" I asked.

"No. You have good eyes and a head of sorts. Use them."

"I could wait to phone the police," Chisholm suggested, "until you —"

"No," Wolfe snapped. "In ten minutes you can have every cop in New York looking for Mr. Ferrone, and it will cost you ten cents. Spend it. I charge more for less."

Chisholm went out, through the door at the left. I thought I might as well start in that direction, and followed him across a hall and into another room. It was good-sized, furnished with desk, chairs, and accessories. Beaky Durkin sat in a corner with his ear to a radio tuned low, and Doc Soffer was there with him. Chisholm barked, "Shut that thing off!" and crossed to a desk with a phone.

Under other circumstances I would have enjoyed having a look at the office of Art Kinney, the New York manager, but I was on a mission and there was too big an audience. I about-faced and backtracked to the clubroom. As I crossed to the door in the far wall, Wolfe was standing by the open door of the refrigerator with a bottle of Beebright in his hand, holding it at arm's length, sneering at it, and Mondor was beside him.

I passed through the door and was in a room both long and wide, with two rows of lockers, benches and stools, and a couple of chairs. The locker doors were marked with numbers and names. I tried three; they were locked. Through a doorway at the left was the shower room. I went to the far end, glancing in at each of the shower stalls, was disappointed to see no pillbox that might have contained sodium phenobarbital, and returned to the locker room.

In the middle of the row on the right was the locker marked "Ferrone." Its door was locked. With my portable key collection I could have operated, but I don't take it along to ball games, and nothing on my personal ring was usable. It seemed to me that the inside of that locker was the first place that needed attention, so I returned to the clubroom, made a face at Wolfe as I went by, and entered Kinney's office. Chisholm had finished phoning and was seated at a desk, staring at the floor. Beaky Durkin and Doc Soffer had their ears glued to the radio.

I asked Chisholm, "Have you got a key to Ferrone's locker?"

His head jerked up. "No. I think Kinney has a master key. I don't know where he keeps it."

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"Fifteen to two," Durkin informed us, or maybe he was just talking to himself. "New York batting in the ninth, two down. Garth got a home run, bases empty. It's all —"

"Shut up!" Chisholm yelled at him.

Since Kinney would soon be with us, and since Ferrone's locker had first call, I thought I might as well wait there for him. However, with our client sitting there glaring at me it would be well to display some interest and energy, so I moved. I went to the filing cabinets and looked them over. I opened a door, saw a hall leading to stairs going down, and shut the door. I crossed to another door in the opposite wall, and opened that.

Since I hadn't the faintest expectation of finding anything pertinent beyond that door, let alone a corpse, I must have made some sign of surprise, but if so it wasn't noticed. I stood for three seconds, then slipped inside and squatted long enough to get an answer to the main question. I arose, backed out, and addressed Soffer:

"Take a look here, Doc. I think he's dead."

He made a noise, stared, and moved. I marched into the clubroom and crossed to the couch where Wolfe was sitting.

"Found something," I told him. "Nick Ferrone, in uniform, on the floor of a closet, with a baseball bat alongside him and his head smashed in. He's dead, according to me, but Doc Soffer is checking, if you want an expert opinion."

Wolfe grunted. "Call the police."

"Yes, sir. A question: Any minute the ballplayers will be coming in here. The cops won't like it if they mess around. Do we care? It won't be Cramer. This is the Bronx, not Manhattan. Do we —?"

A bellow, Chisholm's, came through: "Wolfe! Come in here!"

Wolfe got up, growling. "We owe the police nothing, but we have a client — I think we have. I'll see. Meanwhile, you stay here. Everyone entering this room remains, under surveillance." He headed for Kinney's office.

Another door opened, the one in the west wall, and Nat Neill, New York's center fielder, entered the clubroom, his jaw set and his eyes blazing. Following him came Lew Baker, the catcher. Behind them, on the stairs, was a clatter of footsteps.

The game was over. New York had lost. . . .

Another thing I don't take along to ball games is a gun, but that day there was a moment when I wished I had. After any ordinary game, even a lost one, I suppose the team might have been merely irritated if, on getting to the clubhouse, they found a stranger backed up against the door to the locker room telling them they could not pass. But that day they were ready to plug one another, so why not a stranger?

The first dozen were ganging me, about to start using hands, when Art Kinney, the manager, appeared. He strode, tight-lipped, through to his office and the gang let up to consider;

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all but Bill Moyse, the second-string catcher, six-feet-two and over 200 pounds. He had come late, after Kinney. He strode up to me, making fists, and announced that his wife was waiting for him, he was going in to change, and either I would move or he would move me.

One of his teammates called: "Show him her picture, Bill! That'll move him!"

Moyse whirled and leaped. Hands grabbed for him but he kept going. Whether he reached his target or not I can't say, because, first, I was staying put and it was quite a mix-up, and, second, I was seeing something that wasn't present. The mention of Moyse's wife and her picture had done it. What I was seeing was a picture of a girl that had appeared in the *Gazette* a couple of months back, with a caption tagging her as the show-girl bride of William Moyse, the ball-player; and it was the girl I had been glomming in a nearby box when the summons had come from Chisholm. No question about it. That was interesting.

Meanwhile, Moyse was doing me a service by making a diversion. Three or four men had hold of him, and others were gathered around his target, Con Prentiss, the shortstop. They were all jabbering. Prentiss, who was wiry and tough, was showing his teeth in a grin, not an attractive one. Moyse suddenly whirled again and was heading back for me. It was useless to start slugging that mountain of muscle, and I was set to try locking him, when a loud voice came from the doorway to the manager's office:

"Here! Attention, all of you!"

It was Art Kinney. His face was absolutely white and his neck cords were twitching, as they all turned toward him.

"I'm full up," he said, half hysterical. "This is Nero Wolfe, the detective. He'll tell you something."

Muttering began as Kinney stepped aside and Wolfe took his place in the doorway. The great man's eyes swept over them, and then he spoke:

"You deserve an explanation, gentlemen, but the police are coming and there's not much time. You have just lost a ball game by knavery. Four of you were drugged, in a drink called Beebright, and could not perform properly. You will learn —"

They drowned him out. It was an explosion of astonished rage.

"Gentlemen!" Wolfe thundered. "Will you listen?" He glowered. "You will learn more of that later, but there is something more urgent. The dead body of one of your colleagues, Mr. Nick Ferrone, has been discovered on these premises. He was murdered. It is supposed, naturally, that the two events, the drugging and the murder, are connected. In any case, if you do not know what a murder investigation means to everyone within reach, innocent or not, you are about to learn. For the moment you will not leave this room. When the police arrive they will tell you —"

Heavy feet were clomping in the hall. The door swung open and a uni-

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formed cop stepped in, followed by three others. The one in front, a sergeant, halted and demanded indignantly:

"What's all this? Where is it?"

The team looked at the cops, and hadn't a word to say. . . .

Inspector Hennessy of Bronx Homicide was tall and straight, silver-haired, with a bony face and quick-moving gray eyes. Two years before he had told Nero Wolfe that if he ever again tried poking into a murder in the Bronx he would be escorted to the Harlem River and dunked. But when, at 9 o'clock that evening, Hennessy breezed through the clubroom, passing in front of the leather couch where Wolfe was seated, with a ham sandwich in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other, he didn't even toss him a glance. He was much too busy.

The Police Commissioner was in Manager Kinney's office with Chisholm and others. The Bronx District Attorney and an assistant were in the locker room, along with an assortment of Homicide men, giving various athletes their third or fourth quiz. There were still a couple of dozen city employees in the clubhouse, though the scientists — the photographers and fingerprint hounds — had all finished and gone.

I had standing as the finder of the corpse, but also I was a part of Wolfe. Technically, Wolfe was *not* poking into a murder; he had been hired by Chisholm, before the corpse had been found, to find out who had doped the ballplayers. However, in gathering facts for relay to Wolfe I had not discriminated. I saw Nick Ferrone's locker opened and the contents examined, with no startling disclosures.

While I was in Kinney's office watching a basket squad load the corpse and carry it out, I heard a lieutenant on the phone giving instructions for a roundup of gamblers throughout the metropolitan area. A little later I picked up a bunch of signed statements from a table, and sat down and read them through, without anyone noticing. By that time the commissioner and the district attorney had arrived, and they had eight or nine quiz posts going in the various rooms, and Hennessy was doing his best to keep it organized.

I collected all I could for Wolfe. The bat that had been used to crack Ferrone's skull was no stock item, but a valued trophy. With it, years back, there had been belted a grand slam home run that had won a pennant, and it had been displayed on a wall rack in the manager's office. The murderer could have simply grabbed it from the rack. It had no usable fingerprints. Of eight bottles of Beebright left in the cooler, the two in front had been doped and the other six had not. No other drinks had been tampered with. Everyone had known of the liking of those four — Baker, Prentiss, Neill, and Eston — for Beebright, and their habit of drinking a bottle of it before a game. No good prints. No sign anywhere of a container of sodium phenobarbital tablets.

There were a thousand other nega-

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tives; for instance, the clubhouse boy, Jimmie Burr. The custom was that when he wasn't around, the players would put chits in a little box for what they took; and he hadn't been around. For that game someone had got him a box seat, and he had beat it to the grandstand while most of the players were in the locker room, changing. A sergeant jumped on it: Who had got him out of the way by providing a ticket for a box seat? But it had been Art Kinney himself, the manager.

Around 8 o'clock they turned a big batch loose. Twenty men, including coaches and the bat boy, were allowed to go to the locker room to change, under surveillance, and then let out, with instructions to keep available. They were not in the picture as it then looked.

It was established that Ferrone had arrived at the clubhouse shortly after 12 o'clock and had got into uniform; a dozen of the men had been in the locker room with him. He had been present during a pre-game session with Kinney in the clubroom, and no one remembered seeing him leave afterward. When they trooped out and down the stairs and emerged onto the field, Ferrone's absence was not noticed until they had been in the dugout for some minutes.

As the cops figured it, he couldn't have been slammed with a baseball bat in Kinney's office only a few yards away, while the team was in the clubroom, and therefore all who had unquestionably left for the field with the gang, and had stayed there, were in the clear until further notice. With them went Pierre Mondor, who had wanted to see a ball game and had picked a beaut.

As I said, when Inspector Hennessy breezed through the clubroom at 9 o'clock, coming from the locker room and headed for Kinney's office, he didn't even toss a glance at the leather couch where Wolfe and I were seated. He disappeared. But soon he was back again, speaking from the doorway:

"Come in here, will you, Wolfe?"

"No," Wolfe said. "I'm eating."

"The commissioner wants you."

"Is he eating?" Waiting for no reply, Wolfe turned his head and bellowed, "Mr. Skinner! I'm dining!"

It wasn't very polite, I thought, to be sarcastic about the sandwiches and beer Chisholm had provided. Hennessy started a remark which indicated that he agreed with me, but it was interrupted by the appearance of Commissioner Skinner at his elbow. Hennessy stepped in and aside, and Skinner approached the couch, followed by Chisholm.

Skinner kept it friendly: "I've just learned that four men who were told they could go are still here: Baker, Prentiss, Neill, and Eston. When Inspector Hennessy asked them why, they told him that Mr. Chisholm had asked them to stay. Mr. Chisholm says that he did so at your suggestion. He understood that you wanted to speak with them after our men have all left. Is that correct?"

Wolfe nodded. "I made it quite plain, I thought."

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"M-m." The commissioner regarded him. "You see, I know you fairly well. You wouldn't dream of hanging on here half the night to speak with those men merely as a routine step in an investigation. And, besides, at Mr. Chisholm's request you have already been permitted to speak with them, and with several others. You're cooking something. Those are the four men who were drugged, but they left the clubhouse for the field with the rest of the team, so the way we figure it, none of them killed Ferrone. How do you figure it?"

Wolfe swallowed the last of a well-chewed bite. "I don't."

Hennessy growled and set his jaw.

Skinner said, "I don't believe it," with his tone friendlier than his words. "You're cooking something," he insisted. "What's the play with those four men?"

Wolfe shook his head. "No, sir."

Hennessy took a step forward. "Look," he said; "this is the Bronx. You don't turn *this* murder into a parlor game."

Wolfe raised brows at him. "Murder? I am not concerned with murder. Mr. Chisholm hired me to investigate the drugging of his employees. The two events may, of course, be connected, but the murder is your job. And they were not necessarily connected. I understand that a man named Moyse is in there now with the district attorney" — Wolfe aimed a thumb at the door to the locker room — "because it has been learned that he has twice within a month assaulted Mr. Ferrone physically through resentment at Ferrone's interest in his wife, injudiciously displayed. And that Moyse did not leave the clubhouse with the others, but arrived at the dugout three or four minutes later, just before Ferrone's absence was noticed. For your murder, Mr. Hennessy, that should be a help; but it doesn't get me on with my job — disclosure of the culprit who drugged the drinks. Have you charged Mr. Moyse?"

"No." Hennessy was curt. "So you're not interested in the murder?"

"Not as a job, since it's not mine. But if you want a comment from a specialist, you're closing your lines too soon."

"We haven't closed any lines."

"You let twenty men walk out of here. You are keeping Moyse for the reasons given. You are keeping Dr. Soffer, I suppose, because when Ferrone was missed in the dugout Soffer came here to look for him, and he could have found him here alive and killed him. You are keeping Mr. Durkin, I suppose again, because he, too, could have been here alone with Ferrone. He says he left the clubhouse shortly before the team did and went to his seat in the grandstand, and stayed there. Has he been either contradicted or corroborated?"

"No."

"Then you regard him as vulnerable on opportunity?"

"Yes."

"Are you holding Mr. Chisholm for the same reason?"

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Chisholm made a noise. Skinner and Hennessy stared. Skinner said, "We're not holding Mr. Chisholm."

"You should be, for consistency," Wolfe declared. "This afternoon, when I reached my seat in the stands, at twenty minutes past one, the mayor and others were there in a nearby box, but Mr. Chisholm was not. He arrived a few minutes later. He has told me that when he arrived with his party, about 1 o'clock, he had the others escorted to the stands, that he started for the clubhouse for a word with his employees, that he was delayed by the crowd and decided it was too late, and then proceeded to the box. If the others are vulnerable on opportunity, so is he."

They made remarks, all three of them, not appreciative.

Wolfe put the beer bottle to his lips, tilted it, and swallowed. He put the bottle down empty.

"I was merely," he said mildly, "commenting on the murder as a specialist. As for my job, learning who drugged the drinks, I haven't even made a start. How could I in this confounded hubbub? Trampled by an army. I have been permitted to sit here and talk to people, yes, with a succession of your subordinates standing behind me breathing down my neck. Pfui!"

"Very rude, I'm sure," Hennessy said dryly. "The commissioner has asked you, what's the play with those four men?"

Wolfe shook his head. "Not only those four. I included others in my request to Mr. Chisholm: Dr. Soffer, Mr. Kinney, Mr. Durkin, and of course Mr. Chisholm himself. I am not arranging a parlor game. I make a living as a professional detective, and I need their help on this job I've undertaken. I think I know why — engrossed as you are with the most sensational case you've had in years — you're spending all this time chatting with me: You suspect I'm contriving a finesse. Well, I am."

"You are?"

"Yes." Wolfe suddenly was peevish. "Haven't I sat here for five hours submerged in your pandemonium? Haven't you all the facts that I have, and many more besides? Haven't you thousands of men to command — and I but one? One little fact strikes me, as apparently it has not struck you, and in my forlorn desperation I decide to test my interpretation of it. For that test I need help, and I ask Mr. Chisholm to provide it."

"We'll be glad to help," Skinner offered. "Which fact, and how do you interpret it?"

"No, sir." Wolfe was positive. "It is my one slender chance to earn a fee. I intend —"

"But we may not know this fact."

"Certainly you do. I have stated it explicitly during this conversation, but I won't point at it for you. If I did you'd spoil it for me, and, slender as it is, I intend to test it. I am not beset with the urgency of murder, as you are, but I'm in a fix. I don't need a motive strong enough to incite a man to murder, merely one to persuade

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him to drug some bottled drinks — mildly, far from lethally. A thousand dollars? Twenty thousand? That would be only a fraction of the possible winnings on a World Series game. As for opportunity, anyone at all could have slipped in here late this morning, before others had arrived, with drugged bottles of that drink and put them in the cooler — and earned a fortune. Those twenty men you let go, Mr. Hennessy — how many of them can you say positively did not drug the drinks?"

The inspector was scowling at him. "I can say that I don't think any of them killed Ferrone."

"Ah, but I'm not after the murderer; that's your job." Wolfe upturned a palm. "You see why I am driven to a forlorn finesse?"

We all turned, as a man came in from the locker room. District Attorney Megalech of the Bronx was as masterful as they come and bald as a doorknob. He strode across and told Skinner and Hennessy he wanted to speak with them, took an elbow of each, and steered them through the door to Kinney's office. Chisholm, uninvited, wheeled and followed them.

Wolfe reached for a sandwich and I arose and stood looking down at him. I asked, "How good is this fact you're saving up?"

"Not very." He chewed and swallowed. "Good enough to try if we get nothing better. Evidently they have nothing at all. You heard them."

"Yeah. You told them they have all the facts you have, but they haven't. The one I gave you about Mrs. Moyse? That's not the one you're interpreting privately?"

"No."

"She might still be around, waiting. I might possibly get something better than the one you're saving. Shall I go try?"

He grunted. I took it for a yes, and moved. Outside the hall door stood a cop. I addressed him: "I'm going down to buy Mr. Wolfe a pickle. Do I need to be passed out or in?"

"You?" He used only the right half of his mouth for talking. "Shoot your way through. Huh?"

"Right. Many thanks." I went. . . .

It was dumb to be so surprised, but I was. I might have known that the news that New York had been doped out of the game and the Series, and that Nick Ferrone, the rookie of the year, had been murdered, would draw a record mob. Downstairs inside the entrance there were sentries, and outside a regiment was stretched into a cordon. I was explaining to a sergeant who I was and telling him I would be returning, when three desperate men, one of whom I recognized, came springing at me. All they wanted was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I had to get really rude. I have been clawed at by newspapermen more than once, but I had never seen them quite as hungry as they were that October night. As they wouldn't shake loose, I dived through the cordon and into the mob.

It looked hopeless. The only parked cars in sight on that side of the street

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were police cars. I pushed through to the fringe of the throng and made my way two blocks south. Having made inquiries of two members of the team hours before, I knew what I was looking for: a light-blue sedan.

I crossed the street and headed for the parking plaza. Two cops in the cordon gave me a look, but it wasn't the plaza they were guarding and I marched on through. In the dim light I could see three cars over at the north end. Closer up, one was a light-blue sedan. I went up to it. Two females on the front seat were gazing at me through the window, and one of them was my glommee. The radio was on. I opened the door and said hello.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"My name's Archie Goodwin. I'll show credentials if you are Mrs. William Moyse."

"What if I am?"

She was rapidly erasing the pleasant memory I had of her. Not that she had turned homely in a few hours, but her expression was not only unfriendly but sour, and her voice was not agreeable. I got out my wallet and extracted my license card. "If you are who I think you are," I said, "this will identify me."

"Okay, your name's Goodman." She ignored the card. "So what?"

"Not Goodman." I pronounced it for her: "Archie Goodwin. I work for Nero Wolfe, who is up in the clubhouse. I just came from there. Why not turn off the radio?"

"I'd rather turn you off," she said bitterly.

Her companion, the redhead who had been with her in the box, reached for the knob, and the radio died. "Look, Lila," she said earnestly; "you're acting like a sap. Invite him in. He may be human. Maybe Bill sent him."

"What did Walt tell us?" Lila snapped at her. "Nero Wolfe is there working with the cops." She came back at me: "Did my husband send you? Prove it."

I put a foot on the edge of the frame, not aggressively. "That's one reason," I said, "why Mr. Wolfe can't stand women. The way they flop around, intellectually. I didn't say your husband sent me. He didn't. He couldn't even if he wanted to, because for the past hour he has been kept in the locker room conversing with a gathering of homicide hounds, and still is. Mr. Wolfe sent me. But in a way it's a personal problem I've got, and no one but you can help me."

"*You've* got a personal problem! *You* have! Take it away."

"I will if you say so, but wait till I tell you. Up to now they have only one reason for picking on your husband. The players left the clubhouse for the field in a bunch — all but one of them, who left later and got to the dugout a few minutes after the others. It was Bill Moyse. They all agreed on that, and Bill admits it. The cops figure that he had seen or heard something that made him suspect Nick Ferrone of doping the drinks — you know about that? That the Beebright was doped?"

"Yes. Walt Goidell told me." She

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gestured toward the redhead. "Helen's husband. He's on the team."

"And that he stayed behind with Ferrone to put it to him, and Nick got tough, and he got tougher, with a baseball bat. That's how the cops figure it, and that's why they're after Bill. But I have a private reason, confided only to Nero Wolfe, to think that the cops have got it twisted. Mr. Wolfe is inclined to agree with me, but he hasn't told the cops, because he has been hired by Chisholm and wants to earn a fat fee. My private slant is that if Bill did kill Ferrone — please note the 'if' — it wasn't because he caught Ferrone doping the drinks, but the other way around. Ferrone caught Bill doping the drinks, and was going to spill it, and Bill killed him."

She was goggling at me. "You have the nerve —!"

"Hold it. I'm telling you. This afternoon at the game I was in a box. By the sixth inning I had had plenty of the game and looked around for something to take my mind off it, and I saw an extremely attractive girl. I looked at her some more. I had a feeling that I had seen her before, but couldn't place her. The score was 11 to 1, the home team were flat on their faces, and that lovely specimen was exactly what my eyes needed — except for one flaw. She was having a swell time. Her whole face and manner showed it. She liked what was happening out on the field."

She was trying to say something, but I raised my voice a little: "Wait till I tell you. Later, after the game, in the clubhouse, Bill Moyse said his wife was waiting for him, and someone made a crack about showing me her picture. Then it clicked. I remembered seeing a picture of his bride in the *Gazette*, and it was the girl I had seen in the stands. Then, later, I had a chance to ask some of the players some questions, and I learned that she usually drove to games in Bill's light-blue sedan and waited for him after the game. It puzzled me that it made the wife of a New York player happy to see his team getting walloped in the deciding game of a World Series, and Mr. Wolfe agreed. Why were you tickled stiff to see them losing?"

"I wasn't."

"It's perfectly ridiculous," the redhead snorted.

I shook my head. "That won't do. Mr. Wolfe accepts my judgment on girls, and I have told him you were happy. If I go back and report that you flatly deny it, I don't see how he can do anything but tell the cops, and that will be bad. They'll figure that you wanted New York to lose because you knew Bill did, and why. Then, of course, they'll refigure the murder and get a new answer — that Ferrone found out that Bill had doped the drinks, and Bill killed him. They'll start on Bill all over again and —"

"Stop it!"

"I was only saying, if they —"

The redhead horned in, then. "How dumb can you get?" she demanded. "You say you know girls! Do you know baseball girls? I'm one! I'm

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Helen Goidell, Walt's wife. I would have liked to slap Lila this afternoon, sitting there gloating, much as I love her. But I'm not a sap like you! She's not married to the team, she's married to Bill! Lew Baker had batted .132 in the first six games of the Series, and he had made four errors and had nine bases stolen on him, and still they wouldn't give Bill a chance. Lila had sat through those six games praying to see Bill walk out — and not once! What did she care about the Series? She wanted to see Bill in it. And look at Baker this afternoon! If he had been doped, all right, but Lila didn't know it then. All she knew was that Bill was probably going to get his chance. What you know about girls, you nitwit!"

She was blazing. I did not blaze back.

"I'm still willing to learn," I said agreeably. "Is she right, Mrs. Moyse?"

"Yes."

"Then I am, too, on the main point? You were pleased to see New York losing?"

"I said she was right."

"Yeah. Then I've still got a problem. If I accept your version, and report to Wolfe accordingly, he'll accept it, too. Whether you think I know girls or not, he does. So that's some responsibility for me. What if you're a lot smoother and trickier than I think you are? Your husband is suspected of murder, and they're still working on him. What if he's guilty and they manage to squeeze out of you what they need to hook him? How will I look if they do? Any suggestions?"

Lila had none. She sat with her head lowered, silent.

"You sound almost human," Helen Goidell said.

"That's deceptive," I told her. "I turn it on and off. If I thought she had something Mr. Wolfe could use I'd stop at nothing, even hair-pulling. But at the moment I really don't think she has. I think she's pure and innocent and wholesome. Her husband is another matter. For her sake, I hope he wriggles out of it somehow, but I'm not taking any bets. The cops seem to like him, and I know cops as well as I do girls." I removed my foot from the car frame. "So long and so forth." I turned to go.

"Wait a minute." It was Lila.

I turned back. Her head was up.

"Is this straight?" she asked.

"Is what straight?"

"You're going to tell Mr. Wolfe you're satisfied about me?"

"Well. Satisfied is quite a word. I'm going to tell him I have bought your explanation of your happiness at the game — or, rather, Mrs. Goidell's."

"You could be a liar."

"Not only could be, I often am, but not at the moment."

She regarded me. "Maybe you can tell me about Bill," she said. "They don't really think he killed Nick Ferrone, do they?"

"They think maybe he did."

"I know he didn't."

"Good for you. But you weren't

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there, so you don't have a vote."

She nodded. She was being hard and practical. "Are they going to arrest him? Will they really charge him with murder?"

"I can't say. But Bill is the leading candidate."

"Then I've got to do something. I wish I knew what he's telling them. Do you know?"

"Only that he's denying he knows anything about it. He says he left the clubhouse after the others had gone, because he went back to the locker room to change to other shoes."

She shook her head. "I don't mean that. I mean, whether he told them—" She stopped. "No. I know he didn't. He wouldn't. He knows something and I know it, too, about a man trying to fix that game. Only, he wouldn't tell, on account of me. I have to go and see someone downtown. Will you come along?"

"To see who?"

"I'll tell you on the way."

Helen Goidell blurted, "For heaven's sake, Lila, do you know what you're saying?"

If Lila replied I missed it, for I was on my way around the car. It was a little headstrong to dash off with a damsel, leaving Wolfe up there with mass-production sandwiches, warm beer, and his one measly little fact he was saving up, but this might be really hot.

By the time I got around to the other door Helen had it open and was getting out. Her feet on the ground, she turned to speak: "I don't want any part of this, Lila. I do not! I wish I'd gone with Walt instead of staying with you!"

She turned and trotted off, toward the street. I climbed in and pulled the door shut.

"She'll tell Walt," Lila said.

I nodded. "Yeah. But does she know where we're going?"

"No."

"Then let's go."

She started the engine, levered to reverse, and backed the car.

Under ordinary circumstances she was probably a pretty good driver, but that night wasn't ordinary for her. Swinging right, there was a little click on my side as we grazed the fender of a stopped car. Rolling up the grade, we slipped between two taxis, clearing by an inch, and both hackmen yelled at her. Stopping for a light at the crest, she turned her head and spoke:

"It's my Uncle Dan. His name is Gale. He came last night and asked me—"

She fed gas and we shot forward, but a car heading uptown and squeezing the light was suddenly there smack in our path. With a lightning reflex her foot hit the brake, the other car zipped by with at least a foot to spare, she fed gas again, and the sedan jerked forward.

I asked her, "Taking the Highway?"

"Yes, it's quicker."

"It will be if you make it. Just concentrate on that and let the details wait."

She got to the downtown side of the highway without any actual con-

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tact with other vehicles, turned into the left lane and stepped on it. The speedometer said 55 when she spoke again.

"If I go ahead and tell you, I can't change my mind. He wanted me to persuade Bill to fix the game. He said he'd give us $10,000. I didn't even want to tell Bill, but he insisted, so I did. I knew what Bill would say —"

She broke off to do some expert weaving, swerving to the middle lane, then a sprint, then swinging back to the left again in front of a couple of cars that had slowed her down to under 50.

"Look," I told her; "you could gain up to two minutes this way with luck, but getting stopped and getting a ticket would take at least ten. You're driving, okay, but don't try to talk, too."

She didn't argue, but she held the pace. I twisted around to keep an eye on the rear through the window, and stayed that way clear to 57th Street. We rolled down the ramp and a block south, turned left on 56th Street, had a green light at Eleventh Avenue, and went through. A little short of Tenth Avenue we turned into the curb and stopped. Lila reached for the hand brake and gave it a yank.

"Let's hear it," I said. "Enough to go on. Is Uncle Dan a gambler?"

"No." Her face turned to me. "I'm afraid of him."

"Then what is he?"

"He runs a drugstore. He owns it. That's where we're going to see him. My father and mother died when I was just a kid, and Uncle Dan has been good to me — as good as he could. If it hadn't been for him I'd have been brought up in an orphans' home. Of course, Bill wanted to tell Art Kinney last night, but he didn't on account of me, and that's why he's not telling the cops."

"Maybe he is telling them, or soon will."

She shook her head. "I know Bill. We decided we wouldn't tell, and that settled it. Uncle Dan made me promise we wouldn't tell before he said what he wanted."

I grunted. "Even so, he was crowding his luck, telling you two about the program before signing you up. If he explained the idea of doping the Beebright —"

"But he didn't! He didn't say how it was to be done. He didn't get that far, because Bill said nothing doing, as I knew he would."

I eyed her. "This was last night?"

"Yes."

"What time?"

"Around 8 o'clock. We had dinner early with Helen and Walt Goidell, and when we got home Uncle Dan was there waiting for us."

"Where's home?"

"Our apartment on Seventy-ninth Street. He spoke to me alone first, and then insisted I had to ask Bill."

"And Bill turned him down flat?"

"Of course he did!"

"Bill didn't see him alone later?"

"Of course not!"

"All right, don't bite. I need to know. Now what?"

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"We're going to see him. We're going to tell him that we have to tell the cops, and we're going to try to get him to come along. That's why I wanted you with me, because I'm afraid of him — I mean, I'm afraid he'll talk me out of it. But they've got to know that Bill was asked to fix the game and he wouldn't. If it's hard on Uncle Dan that's too bad, but I can't help it. I'm for Bill, all the way."

I was making myself look at her, for discipline. I was having the normal male impulses at the sight and sound of a good-looking girl in trouble, and they were worse than normal because I was partly responsible. I had given her the impression that the cops were about set to take her Bill on the big one, which was an exaggeration. I hadn't mentioned that one reason they were keeping him was his reaction to the interest Nick Ferrone had shown in her, which of course had no bearing on anyone's attempt to fix a ball game. True, she had been in a mess before I had got to her, but I had shoved her in deeper. What she needed now was understanding and sympathy, and I was all she had. Which was I, a man or a detective?

"Okay," I said, "let's go see Uncle Dan."

The engine was running. She released the hand brake, fed gas, and we rolled. Three minutes got us to Eighth Avenue, where we turned downtown. The car slowed and she pulled in at the curb.

"There it is." She pointed. "Gale's Pharmacy."

It was ten paces down. There were lights in the window, but otherwise it looked drab. I got out and held the door, and she joined me on the sidewalk. She put a hand on my arm.

"You're staying right with me," she stated.

"Absolutely," I assured her. "I'm good with uncles."

As we crossed to the entrance and went inside I was feeling not fully dressed. I have a routine habit of wearing a gun when I'm on a case involving people who may go to extremes, but, as I said, I do not go armed to ball games. However, at first sight of Daniel Gale I did not put him in that category. His drugstore was so narrow that a fat man would have had to squeeze between the soda-fountain stools and the central showcase, and that made it look long, but it wasn't. Five or six customers were on the stools, and the soda jerk was busy.

At the cosmetics counter on the left, a woman was being waited on by a little guy with a pale, tight-skinned face, wearing glasses.

"That's him," Lila whispered to me.

We waited near the door. Uncle Dan, concentrating on the customer, hadn't seen us. Finally the customer made her choice and, as he tore off paper to wrap the purchase, his eyes lifted and he saw Lila. Also, he saw me, beside her. He froze. He held it, rigid, for seconds, then came to, went on with the wrapping job, and was handed a bill by the customer. While he was at the cash register Lila and I crossed to the counter. As he handed

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the woman her change, Lila spoke:

"Uncle Dan, I've got to tell you—"

She stopped because he was gone. Without speaking, he turned and made for the rear, disappeared behind a partition, and a door closed. I didn't like it, but didn't want to start a commotion by hurdling the counter, so I stepped to the end and circled, went to the door that had closed, and turned the knob. It was locked. There I was, out at first, unless I was prepared to smash the door in.

The soda jerk called, "Hey, Mac, come out of that!"

"It's all right," Lila told him. "I'm his niece — Mr. Gale is my Uncle Dan."

"I never saw you before, lady. . . . You, Mac, come out here where you belong! Whose uncle are you?"

A couple of the fountain customers gave him his laugh. Then the door I was standing by popped open and Uncle Dan was there, beside me.

"Henry!" he called.

"Right here!" the soda jerk called back.

"Take over for a while — I'll be busy. Come here, Lila, will you?"

Lila circled the end of the counter and approached us. There wasn't room enough to be gallant and let her pass, so I followed Gale through the door into the back room ahead of her. It was small, and the stacks of shipping cartons and other objects took most of what space there was. The rows of shelves were crammed with packaged merchandise, except those along the right wall, which held labeled bottles. Gale stopped near the door, and Lila and I went on by.

"We don't want to be disturbed," Gale said, and bolted the door.

"Why not?" I inquired.

He faced me, and from a distance of five arms' lengths, with Lila between us, I had my first good view of the eyes behind the specs. They were cold and deadly.

"Because," he was telling me, "this is a private matter. You see, I recognized you, Mr. Goodwin. Your face is not as well known as your employer's, but it has been in the papers on several occasions, and you were in my mind on account of the news. The radio bulletins have included the detail that Nero Wolfe and his assistant were present and engaged by Mr. Chisholm. So when I saw you with my niece I realized we should talk privately. But you're an impulsive young man, and for fear you may not like what I say, I make conditions. I shall stay here near the door. You will move to that packing case back of you and sit on it, with your hands in sight and making no unnecessary movements. My niece will put the chair here in front of me and sit on it, facing you, between you and me. That way I will feel free to talk."

I thought he was batty. As a setup against one of my impulses, including a gun if I had had one, it made no sense at all. I backed up to the packing case and lowered myself, resting my hands on my knees to humor him. When Lila saw me complying she moved the chair, the only one there,

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as directed, and sat with her back to her uncle. He, himself, went to a narrow counter, picked up a bottle of colorless liquid, removed the glass stopper, held it to his nose, and sniffed.

"I do not have fainting spells," he said apologetically, "but at the moment I am a little unstrung. Seeing my niece here with you was a real shock for me. I came back here to consider what it might mean, but reached no conclusion. Perhaps you'll explain?"

"Your niece will. Tell him, Lila."

She started to twist around in the chair, but he commanded her: "No, my dear, stay as you were. Face Mr. Goodwin." He took another sniff at the bottle.

She obeyed. "It's Bill," she said. "They're going to arrest him for murder, and they mustn't. They won't, if we tell them how you offered to pay him for fixing the game and he wouldn't do it. He won't tell them, on account of me, so we have to. I know I promised you I wouldn't, but now I've got to. You see how it is, Uncle Dan; I've got to."

"You haven't told the police?"

"No. I thought the best way was to come and get you to go with me. I was afraid to come alone, because I know how bad it will be for you, but it will be worse for Bill if we don't. Don't you see, Uncle —?"

"Keep your back turned, Lila. I insist on it. That's right; stay that way." He had been talking in an even low tone, but now his voice became thin and strained: "I'll tell you why I want your back to me — so I can't see your face. . . . Remember, Goodwin, don't move! . . . This is a bottle of pure sulphuric acid. I was smelling it just to explain why I had it; of course, it has no smell. I suppose you know what it will do. This bottle is nearly full, and I'm holding it carefully, because one drop on your skin will scar you for life. That's why I want your back to me, Lila. I'm very fond of you, and I don't want to see your face if I have to use this acid. If you move, Lila dear, I'll use it. Or you, Goodwin; especially you. I hope you both understand?"

His hand holding the bottle hovered inches above her head. She looked as if she might keel over, and I urged her, "Sit tight, Lila, and don't scream."

"Yes," Uncle Dan said approvingly. "I should have mentioned that. Screaming would be as bad as moving. I had to tell you about the acid before I discussed matters. I'm not surprised at your fantastic suggestion, Lila, because I know how foolish you can be, but I'm surprised at you, Goodwin. How could you expect me to consent to my complete ruin? Did Lila persuade you that I am an utter fool?"

"I guess she must have," I admitted. "What kind of man are you?"

He proceeded to tell me, and I pretended to listen. I also tried to keep my eyes on his pale, tight-skinned face, but that wasn't easy, because they were fascinated by the bottle he was holding. Meanwhile, my brain was buzzing. Unless he was plain loony

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the only practical purpose of the bottle must be to gain time — and for what?

". . . and I will," he was saying. "This won't kill you, Lila dear, but it will be horrible, and I don't want to do it unless I have to. Only, you mustn't think I won't. You don't really know me very well, because to you I'm just Uncle Dan. You didn't know that I once had a million dollars and I was an important and dangerous man. There were people who knew me and feared me, but I was unlucky. I have gambled and made fortunes, and lost them. That affects a man's nerves. It changes a man's outlook on life. I borrowed enough money to buy this place, and for years I worked hard and did well — well enough to pay it all back. But that was my ruin. I owed nothing and had a little cash and decided to celebrate by losing $100 to some old friends — just $100, but I didn't lose. I won several thousand. After that I went on, and lost what I had won, and I lost this place.

"So I don't own this place; my friends do. They are very old friends, and they gave me a chance to get this place back. I'm telling you about this, Lila dear, because I want you to understand. I came to you and Bill with that offer because I had to, and you promised me, you swore you would tell no one. I have been an unlucky man, and sometimes a weak one, but I am never going to be weak again — Don't move!"

Lila, who had lifted her head a little, stiffened. I sat gazing at Gale. Obviously, he was stalling for time, but what could he expect to happen? It could be only one thing: he expected somebody to come. He expected help.

As soon as he had seen us he had scooted back here to phone somebody. Help was on the way, the kind of help that would deal with Lila and me efficiently and finally; and big-time gamblers who could provide ten grand to fix a game are just the babies to be ready with that kind of help.

Either he was loony or that was it. But then what? They might come any second; they might be entering the drugstore right now. Any second a knock on the door might come . . .

Gale was talking: "I didn't think you'd tell, Lila, after all I've done for you. You promised me you wouldn't. Now, of course, you've told Goodwin and it can't be helped. If I just tip this bottle a little —"

"Nuts," I said emphatically, but not raising my voice. "You haven't got it staged right." I had my eyes straight on his specs. "Maybe you don't want to see her face, but the way you've got her, with her back to you, it's no good. What if she suddenly ducked, and dived forward? You might get some on her clothes or her feet, but the chair would be in your way. Have you considered that? . . . Better still, what if she suddenly darted sideways in between those cartons? The instant she moved I'd be moving, too, and that would take her out of my path. She'd be taking a chance, but that would be better than

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sitting there waiting for the next act. Unquestionably, it would be better for her to go sideways — with her head down and her arms out. You see how bum your arrangement is? But if you make her turn and face you —"

She moved. She went sideways, to her left, her head down and her arms out, diving for the cartons.

I lost a tenth of a second because I hadn't dared to pull my feet back ready for the spring, but that was all I lost. I didn't leap, I just went, with all the force my leg muscles could give it. My target was the bottom of the left front leg of the chair, and I went in flat, face down, and had the leg before he could get under way. The impact of the chair knocked him back against the door, and I kept going and grabbed his ankle and jerked.

Of course, the bottle could have landed right on me, but I had to get him off his feet. As I yanked his ankle I kept my face down, and he tumbled. The next thing I knew I was on top of him, pinning him, with a grip on his throat, looking around for the bottle. It had never reached the floor. It had landed on a carton six feet to my right and lay there on its side, the stuff gurgling out. The floor slanted toward the wall, so no flood threatened me.

"Okay, Lila," I said. "I need help."

She was scrambling to her feet. "Did he — did it —?" She giggled.

"No. If you have hysterics I'll tell Bill. Slap yourself; I can't."

"But he —"

"Shut up. Company's coming and we've got to get out of here. I want some adhesive tape quick." She started looking on shelves and in drawers. "Watch your step," I told her. "That stuff's spreading to the floor. . . . When I said I was good with uncles I didn't mean uncles like him. He's a lulu. He —"

"Here it is."

"Good girl. Tear off a piece six inches long . . . that's it. Now across his mouth good and tight, diagonally. Now one the other way. . . . That ought to do it, thank you, nurse. Now find some nice sterile bandage."

She found that, too, and held his arms while I sat on his knees and tied his ankles. Then I fastened his wrists behind him and anchored the strip of bandage to the handle of a locked drawer. I squatted for a look at the tape on his mouth, gave it a rub, stood up, went to the door, and pushed the bolt.

"Come on," I told her.

I opened the door and she passed through. I followed and pulled the door to. There were customers on the fountain stools, and Henry was selling a man a pack of cigarettes. I paused on my way to the street door to tell him that Mr. Gale would be out soon, then opened the door for Lila. On the sidewalk I told her to wait in the car while I made a phone call.

Up twenty paces was a bar and grill. I went in, found a phone booth, dialed Manhattan Homicide, asked for Sergeant Purley Stebbins, and got him. He wanted to know if I was still up at the ball park.

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I told him no. "Where I am," I said, "is top secret. I'm giving you a hot one." I gave him the address of Gale's Pharmacy. "Get a prowl car there fast, and plenty of reinforcements. Gale, the owner, on information received, was the go-between for the gamblers who fixed the ball game. He's in the back room of his store, gagged and tied."

"Is *this* a gag?"

"No. The reason for the hurry is that I think Gale sent for a rescue squad to deal with certain parties who are no longer there, and it would be nice to get there in time to welcome them. So PD cars should not park in front. Be sure to tell them not to step in the stuff on the floor that looks like water, because it's sulphuric acid. That's all. Got the address?"

"Yes. Where are you? And —"

"Sorry, I've got a date. This could make you a lieutenant. Step on it."

I went out and back to the car. Lila was on the driver's side, gripping the steering wheel with both hands.

"Move over," I said. "I'll do the driving this time."

She slid across, and I got in and pulled the door to. I sat. Half a minute went by.

"Where are we going?" she asked. Her voice was so weak I barely got it.

"Uptown. Where Bill is." Maybe he was.

"Why don't we start?"

"I phoned for cops. If others come before the cops do I want to get a look at them. In case I forget it later, I want to mention that that was a beautiful dive you made, and the timing couldn't have been better. I'm for you, only spiritually of course, since you're happily married."

"I want to get away from here. I want to see Bill."

"You will. Relax."

We sat, but not for long. It couldn't have been more than four minutes before a pair of cops swung around the corner, headed for the entrance to Gale's Pharmacy, and entered. I pushed the starter button. . . .

It was only half an hour short of midnight when I stopped the car at the curb across the street from the main entrance to the ball park. The mob had dwindled to a few small knots, and of the long line of police cars only three were left. Two cops were having a tête-à-tête in front of the entrance.

Lila was a quick mover. She had got out and circled the car to my side by the time I hit the pavement. I gave her the ignition key and we were crossing the street when suddenly she let out a squawk and started to run. I took another step, and stopped. Bill Moyse was there, emerging from the entrance, with a dick on either side of him and one behind. Lila ended her run in a flying leap and was on him. The startled dicks grabbed for her, and the two uniformed cops started toward them.

I would have liked to deliver Lila to Wolfe, or at least to Hennessy, but there was a fat chance of tearing her loose from her second-string catcher. Also, I did not care to get hung up

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explaining to a bunch of underlings how I happened to be chauffeuring for Mrs. Moyse, so I detoured around the cluster, made it inside the entrance, and headed for the clubhouse stairs. Hearing heavy footsteps above, starting down, and voices, one of them Hennessy's, I slipped quietly behind a pillar.

Surely Stebbins had informed the Bronx of my phone call about the situation at Gale's Pharmacy, and so surely Hennessy would be inquisitive enough to want to take me along wherever he was going. I didn't risk peeking around the pillar, but, judging from the footsteps, there were four or five men. As soon as they had faded out I went on up the stairs. I was not chipper. I did not have Lila. I had been gone more than two hours. Wolfe might have gone home. They might all be gone.

But they weren't. Wolfe was in the clubroom, on the leather couch, and Chisholm was standing. As I entered, their heads turned to me.

"The police are looking for you," Wolfe said coldly.

"Uh-huh." I played it indifferent. "I just dodged a squad."

"Why did you go to that drugstore?"

I raised the brows. "Oh, you've heard about it?"

"Yes. Mr. Hennessy did, and he was kind enough to tell me." He was dripping sarcasm. "It is a novel experience, learning of your movements through the courtesy of a policeman."

"I was too busy to phone." I glanced at Chisholm. "Maybe I should report privately."

"This is getting to be a farce," Chisholm growled. His tie was crooked, his eyes were bloodshot, and he had a smear of mustard at the side of his mouth.

"No," Wolfe said, to me, not to Chisholm. "Go ahead. But be brief."

I obeyed. With the training and experience I have had I can report a day of dialogue practically verbatim, but he had said to be brief, so I condensed it, including all essentials. When I finished he was scowling.

"Then you don't know whether Gale was actually involved or not. When he failed with Mr. and Mrs. Moyse he may have quit trying."

"I doubt it."

"You could have resolved the doubt. You were sitting on him. Or you could have brought him here."

I might have made three or four cutting remarks if an outsider hadn't been present. I stayed calm. "Maybe I didn't make it clear," I conceded generously. "It was ten to one he had phoned for help, the kind of help that would leave no doubts to resolve, and it might have come any second. Not that I was scared — I was too busy — but I wanted to see you once more so I could resign. I resign."

"Bosh." Wolfe put his hands on the leather seat for leverage and raised himself to his feet. "Very well. I'll have to try it."

Chisholm put in, "Inspector Hennessy said to notify him immediately if Goodwin showed up."

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Wolfe wheeled on him, snarling. "Am I working for you? Yes! Notify Mr. Hennessy? Bah!" He turned and strode through the door that led to Art Kinney's office.

Chisholm and I fell in behind.

They were all in there. The four who were famous athletes didn't look very athletic just at present. Their sap had started draining with the first inning of that awful ball game, and it hadn't stopped for more than ten hours. Lew Baker, catcher, and Con Prentiss, shortstop, were perched on a desk. Joe Eston, third baseman, and Nat Neill, center-fielder, were on chairs.

Art Kinney, the manager, was standing over by a window. Doc Soffer was seated at Kinney's desk, bent over, with his elbows on his knees and his face covered by his hands. Beaky Durkin was propped against a table, saggy and bleary-eyed.

"It had better be good," someone said. I didn't know who, because I was placing a chair for Wolfe where he could see them all without straining his neck. When he was in it, with nothing to spare between the arms, I crossed to a vacant seat over by the radio. Chisholm was there, at my right.

Wolfe's head moved from side to side and back again. "I hope," he said grumpily, "you're not expecting too much."

"I'm through expecting," Kinney muttered.

Wolfe nodded. "I know how you feel, Mr. Kinney. All of you. You are weary and low in spirit. You have been personally and professionally humiliated. You have all been talked at too much. I'm sorry I have to prolong it, but I had to wait until the police were gone. Also, since I have no evidence, I had to let them complete their elaborate and skilled routine in search of some. They got none. Actually, they have nothing but a druggist that Mr. Goodwin got for them."

"They've got Bill Moyse," Con Prentiss rumbled.

"Yes, but on suspicion, not on evidence. Of course I admit, because I must, that I am in the same fix. I, too, have a suspicion but no evidence, only mine is better-grounded. I suspect one of you eight men of drugging the drinks and killing Ferrone. What I—"

They made enough noise to stop him. He held up a palm.

"If you please, gentlemen. I have a question to put. I suspect one of you, but I have no evidence and no way of getting any speedily. That is why I asked Mr. Chisholm to keep you here for consultation with me after the departure of the police. I wanted to ask you: Do you want to help? I would like to tell you the reason for my suspicion and ask you to help me get evidence to support it. I think you can if you will. Well?"

"One of *us*?" Joe Eston demanded.

It was interesting to see them. Naturally, they all had an impulse, all but one, anyway, to look around at faces, but no two of them handled it exactly alike. Chisholm looked

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straight and full at each in turn. Beaky Durkin sent quick little glances here and there. Doc Soffer, frowning and pursing his lips, turned his head slowly left to right.

"Go ahead!" Kinney blurted. "Have you got something or not?"

"Yes, I have something," Wolfe assured him, "but I don't know how good it is. Without your help it is no good at all."

"We'll help if we can. Let's hear it."

"Well. First the background. Were the two events — the drugging of the drinks and the murder — connected? The reasonable supposition is yes, until and unless it is contradicted. If they were connected, how? Did Ferrone drug the drinks, and did one of his teammates discover it and, enraged, go for him with the bat? It seems unlikely."

Wolfe focused on Beaky Durkin: "Mr. Durkin, you knew Ferrone better than anyone else. You discovered him and got him here. You were his roommate and counselor. You told me that because of his brilliant performance this season his salary for next year would be doubled; that his heart was set on winning today's game and the Series; that winning or losing meant a difference of some two thousand dollars to him personally; that his Series money would pay his debts, with some to spare; and that, knowing him intimately, you are positive that he could not have been bribed to drug the drinks. Is that correct?"

"It sure is." Durkin was hoarse and cleared his throat. "Nick was a swell kid." He looked around as if ready for an argument, but nobody started one.

"Do any of you dispute it?" Wolfe asked.

They didn't.

"Then without evidence it is idiotic to assume that he drugged the drinks. The alternative, suppose that the two events were connected, is the reverse: that someone drugged the drinks and Ferrone knew or suspected it and was going to expose him, and was killed. That is how I see it. Call him X. X could have —"

"Don't beat around the bush," Kinney blurted. "Name him!"

"Presently. X could have put the drugged drinks in the cooler any time during the late morning, as opportunity offered. What led Ferrone to suspect him of skulduggery may not be known, but conjecture offers a wide choice. Ferrone's suspicion may have been only superficial, but to X any suspicion whatever was a mortal menace, knowing, as he did, what was going to happen on the ball field. When Ferrone questioned him he had to act. The two were, of course, in this room together, at the time the rest of you were leaving the clubroom for the field or shortly after. X was, as so many have been, the victim of progressive emergency. At first he needed only money, and to get it he stooped to scoundrelism; but it betrayed him into needing the life of a fellow man."

"Cut the rhetoric," Chisholm snapped. "Name him."

Wolfe nodded. "Naming him is easy. But it is pointless to name him,

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and expose myself to an action for slander, unless I can enlist your help. As I said, I have no evidence. All I have is a fact about one of you, a fact known to all of you and to the police, which seems to me to point to guilt. But I admit that other interpretations are conceivable. You are better judges of that than I am, and I'm going to present it for your consideration."

He aimed his gaze at Baker and Prentiss, perched on a desk; raised a hand, slowly, and scratched the tip of his nose. His eyes moved to pin Doc Soffer. His head jerked to the left, to focus on Chisholm, and then right, to Beaky Durkin. He spoke:

"I'll illustrate my meaning. Take you, Mr. Durkin. You have accounted for yourself, but you have been neither contradicted nor corroborated. You say you left the clubhouse shortly before the team did and went to your seat in the grandstand."

"That's right." Durkin was still hoarse. "And I didn't kill Nick."

"I didn't say you did. I am merely expounding. You say you remained in your seat, watching the game, until the third inning, when you were sent for by Mr. Chisholm to come to the clubhouse. That, too, is neither contradicted nor corroborated. Certainly you were there when you were sent for, but there is no proof that you had been there continuously since the game started and even before."

"I don't know about proof, but I was. I can probably find the guy that was sitting next to me."

"You didn't leave your seat once during that time?"

"I did not."

Wolfe looked around. "Well, gentlemen. That's the fact I can't explain. Can you?"

They were gawking at him. "Do we have to?" Baker demanded.

"Someone does." Wolfe's voice sharpened: "Consider the situation. Consider the relationship of those two men. The discovery of Ferrone is Durkin's proudest achievement as a baseball scout. He fosters him and treasures him. Today, now yesterday, at the game that was to be the climax of Ferrone's triumphant season, Durkin is in the clubroom and sees Ferrone there in uniform, with the others, young, sound, mighty, valiant. He leaves the clubhouse and goes to a seat in the grandstand. Before long the loud-speaker announces that Garth, not Ferrone, will play second base. Durkin keeps his seat. The players take the field, and the game starts, with no Ferrone. Durkin keeps his seat. They play the first inning badly. Durkin keeps his seat. They play the second inning badly. Durkin keeps —"

"Good lord!" Art Kinney yelled.

"Exactly." Wolfe lifted a hand. "Please, gentlemen, keep your seats. It is clearly fantastic. The announcement that Garth would play second base could have been taken by Durkin merely as a blunder, but when they took the field without Ferrone his consternation would have been insupportable. The one thing he couldn't possibly have done was to

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stay in his seat. Why did you, Mr. Durkin?"

"I couldn't think —" He tried to clear his throat and almost choked. "What could I do?"

"I don't know. I said I can't explain what you did do, but I can try. Suppose the nonappearance of Ferrone was no surprise to you, because you knew where he was and what had happened to him. Suppose, further, you were in a state of severe systemic shock because you had murdered him. I submit that explanation of your keeping your seat is plausible. Can you offer any other?"

Durkin took two steps. "Look here," he said; "you can't sit there and accuse me of a thing like that. I don't have to stay and take it, and I'm not going to."

He started for the door, but Lew Baker was suddenly there in his path. "Back up, Beaky. I said back up!"

Beaky did so, literally. He backed until his rump hit the edge of the table. He groped for support and braced himself.

Wolfe was grim. "I was supposing, Mr. Durkin, not accusing. But I am now ready to accuse, and I do. I explained, when I was calling you X, how and why you acted." His eyes moved. "Gentlemen, I ask you to look at him. Look at his face, his eyes. Look at his hands, clutching the table in dismay and despair. Yes, I accuse him. I say that that man drugged your drinks, caused you to lose your game, and, threatened with exposure, murdered your teammate."

They were all on their feet, including Art Kinney. They were making threatening sounds.

"Wait!" Wolfe said sharply, and they turned to him. "I must warn you, you approach him at your peril, for I have no proof. It will be gratifying to press a confession out of him, but a confession is not evidence, and we need some. I suggest that you try for it. He did it for money, and surely he was paid something in advance, unless he is a fool. Where is it? Certainly not on his person, since you have all been searched, but it is somewhere, and it would do admirably. Where is it?"

Lew Baker got to Durkin ahead of the others. He told him in a thin, tight voice, so tight it twanged, "I wouldn't want to touch you, Beaky, you dirty rat. Where is it? Where's the jack?"

"Lew, I swear to —"

"Skip it! You fixed us, did you? And Nick — you fixed him. I'd hate to touch you, but if I do —"

The others were there, Kinney and Doc Soffer with them, crowding in on Durkin, who had pulled back onto the table, still gripping the edge. I went to the end of the table and stood. They were all strong and hard, and their nervous systems had had a tough day. Aside from the killing of Nick Ferrone, this was the bird who had made them play ball like half-witted apes in the most important game of their lives, to an audience of fifty million. If they really cut loose there could be another corpse.

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"Give me room, fellows," Nat Neill said. "I'm going to plug him."

Durkin didn't flinch. His jaw was quivering and his eyes looked sick, but he didn't flinch.

"This is wrong," Con Prentiss said. "He wants us to hurt him. He'd like to be knocked cold. He's not a coward; he's just a snake. Look at him."

"It's a moral question," Joe Eston said. "That's the way to handle it; it's a moral question."

Art Kinney shouldered between two of them to get his face within ten inches of Durkin's. "Look, Beaky. You've been in baseball 30 years. You know everybody in the majors and we know you. What do you think's going to happen? Where could you light? We've got you here now and we're going to keep you. I'll send for the whole team. How will you like that?"

"I want a lawyer," Durkin said in a sudden burst.

Neill roared. "He wants a lawyer! Get out of the way — I'm going to clip him!"

"No, Beaky, no lawyers," Kinney said. "I'll send for the boys and we'll lock the doors. Where's the money? We know you got it. Where is it?"

Durkin's head went forward, down. Kinney put a fist under his chin and yanked it up and held it. "No, you don't. Look at me. We've got you, but even if we didn't where could you go? Where are you going to sleep and eat? You're done, Beaky. Where's the money?"

"Let me hold his chin," Neill requested. "I'll fix it for him."

"Shut up," Eston told him. "It's a moral question."

Kinney's fist was still propping Durkin's chin. "I think," he said, "the boys ought to have a look at you. They won't be sleeping anyhow, not tonight. Con, get on the phone and find them. You, too, Lew, the one in the clubroom. Get 'em here — get all of 'em you can. And tell them not to spill it. We don't want any cops around until we get —"

"No!" Durkin squawked.

"No what, Beaky?" Kinney removed his fist.

"I didn't mean to kill Nick." He was slobbering. "I swear I didn't, Art. He suspected. He found out I bet a grand against us and he threw it at me. I brought him here to explain. But he wouldn't believe me and was going to tell you, and he got sore and came at me, and I grabbed the bat just to stop him, and when I saw he was dead — You've got to believe me, Art. I didn't want to kill Nick!"

"You got more than a grand for doping the drinks. How much did you get?"

"I'm coming clean, Art. You can check me and I'm coming clean. I got five grand and I've got five more coming. I had to have it, Art, because the bookies had me down and I was sunk. I was listed good if I didn't come through. I had it on me, but with the cops coming I knew we'd be frisked, so I ditched it. You see I'm coming clean, Art. I ditched it there in the radio. I stuffed it in through a slot."

There was a scramble and a race.

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Prentiss tangled with a chair and went down with it, sprawling. Nat Neill won. He jerked the radio around and started clawing at the back, but the panel was screwed on.

"Here," I said, "I've got a —"

He hauled off and swung with his bare fist, getting his plug out of his system, though not on Durkin. Grabbing an edge of the hole his fist had made, he yanked, and half the panel came off. He looked inside and started to stick his hand in, but I shouldered him, good and hard, and sent him sideways. The others were there, three of them, surrounding me.

"We don't touch it, huh?" I instructed them, and bent down for a look in the radio, and there it was, lodged between a pair of tubes.

"Well?" Wolfe called as I straightened up.

"A good, fat roll," I told him and the world. "The one on the outside is a C."

Beaky Durkin, left to himself on the table, suddenly moved fast. He was on his feet and streaking for the door. Joe Eston, who had claimed it was a moral issue, leaped for him as if he had been a blazing line drive trying to get by, got to him in two bounds, and landed with his right. Durkin went down all the way, slamming the floor with his head, and lay still.

"That will do," Wolfe said, as one who had earned the right to command. "Thank you, gentlemen. I needed help. Archie, get Mr. Hennessy."

I went to Kinney's desk and reached for the phone. At the instant my fingers touched it, it rang. So instead of dialing I lifted it and, feeling cocky, told it, "Nero Wolfe's Bronx office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"This is Inspector Hennessy. Is Durkin there?"

I said yes.

"Fine. Hold him, and hold him good. We cracked Gale and he spilled everything. Durkin is it. Gale got to him and bought him. You'll get credit for getting Gale — that'll be all right — but I'll appreciate it if you'll hold off and let it be announced officially. We'll be there for Durkin in five minutes. Hold him good."

"We're already holding him good. He's stretched out on the floor. Mr. Wolfe hung it on him. Also, we have found a roll of lettuce he cached in the radio."

Hennessy laughed. "You're an awful liar, Goodwin. But you're a privileged character tonight. Have your fun. We'll be there in five minutes."

I hung up and turned to Wolfe: "That was Hennessy. They broke Gale and he unloaded. He gave them Durkin and they're coming for him. Hennessy doesn't believe we've already got him, but of course on that we've got witnesses. The trouble is this: Which of us crossed the plate first, you with your one little fact, or me with my druggist? You can't deny that Hennessy's call came before I started to dial him. How can we settle it?"

We can't. That was months ago, and it's not settled yet.

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FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville (Ind.) Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier*

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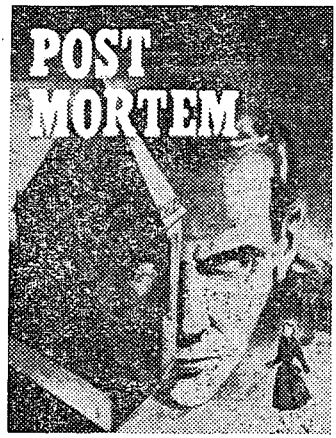

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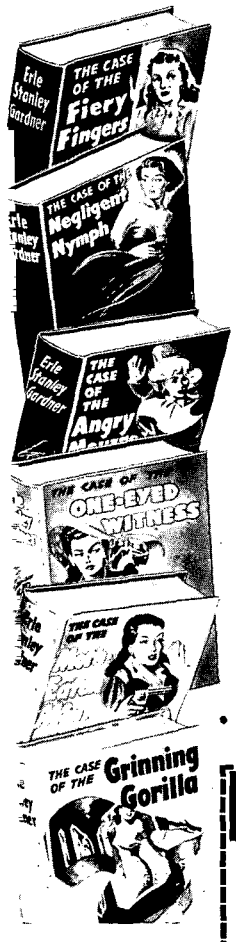
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